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COMBATING TERRORISM DURING CIVIL WAR:
THE CASE OF PESHMERGA OF KURDISTAN
REGION-IRAQ AGAINST ISIS (20142017)**

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THESIS

**THE ROLE OF SUBNATIONAL FORCES IN COMBATING
TERRORISM DURING CIVIL WAR: THE CASE OF
PESHMERGA OF KURDISTAN REGION-IRAQ AGAINST ISIS
(2014–2017)**

by

Hussein M. Khorsheed

March 2020

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DURING CIVIL WAR: THE CASE OF PESHMERGA OF KURDISTAN
REGION-IRAQ AGAINST ISIS (2014–2017)**

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requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
(COMBATING TERRORISM: POLICY AND STRATEGY)**

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ABSTRACT

Scholars and researchers have long held a negative view of subnational forces and their participation in wars, especially civil wars. The literature has tended to suggest that subnational forces are often linked with the longer duration of civil wars, the increased lethality of war, and human rights abuses during war. In this thesis, that general view is challenged by the case of the Peshmerga forces in Iraq. By examining the case of Peshmerga of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq during the conflict against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) between 2014 and 2017, this thesis shows that military institutionalization and external supports were key factors that incentivized the Peshmerga to respect human rights. It finds that, with adequate external support and ties to Western democratic powers, the involvement of subnational forces can be net positive.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq
CCR	Command Council of the Revolution
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
DOD	Department of Defense
ICDF	Iraqi Civil Defense Force
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISI	Islamic State in Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JTJ	Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KDP-PC	Kurdistan Democratic Party Provisional Command
KNF	Kurdistan National Front
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region-Iraq
MNF-I	Multinational Forces-Iraq
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
RAF	British Royal Air Force
UNCHR	United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights
VBIED	Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device

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I. THE ROLE OF SUBNATIONAL FORCES IN COUNTERING TERRORISM DURING CIVIL WARS

The campaign to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) demonstrated the ability of subnational forces to counter terrorism during civil wars. In 2014, ISIS started attacking different cities of Iraq one after another; eventually, their attacks included the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). But their attacks were repelled, and their advances were stopped by the Kurdish security force known as the Peshmerga. The Peshmerga are a subnational force who defend the federal region of KRG. In general, scholars have a negative view about subnational forces, yet the Peshmerga played a major role in defeating ISIS in the Kurdistan Region. Therefore, this research explores the following question: what is the role of subnational groups in countering terrorism during civil wars? The role of the Kurdish Peshmerga is used as a case study, focusing on their fight against ISIS from 2014 to 2017.

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The exploration of the main research question just identified inevitably raises related issues for consideration. Among the associated questions considered in this thesis are: What is the role of subnational forces in combating terrorism during civil wars? Do subnational groups make wars shorter? Do they extend wars and make them bloodier? Can they assist state forces, or do they inevitably work against them?

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

This topic increases the awareness of the role of subnational forces, which has been underinvestigated both in general and in this case. The focus of scholars on terrorism is usually on national armed forces, which has made them overlook the role of subnational forces. The scholarly literature available on subnational forces views them as militia groups that weaken state authority, delay peace, engage in anti-civilian atrocities, undertake illicit trafficking, and serve as proxies of other countries. This thesis argues that subnational forces, to the contrary, can serve as effective elements of security and political stability. In addition, the available scholarly research about the Kurdish Peshmerga is outdated or has

not investigated their main role in fighting ISIS. The case of the Peshmerga in the KRI illustrates that under the right circumstances, subnational forces can be positive actors in civil wars.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many countries do not meet Weber's classic definition of statehood. Weber defines the state as the "human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."¹ The institution of the military is key to meeting this definition, however, militaries are not always successful in this regard. Often, subnational armed groups challenge states' monopoly on violence. They have a hostile attitude toward the national army, such as insurgent groups who are defined as "organized insurgency aimed at overthrowing a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict."² These forces in some cases become terrorist groups. The Department of Defense (DOD) defines terrorism as "the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological."³ Armed groups that ally with the state, referred to as government militias, are defined as "the armed groups that are linked to the government but exist outside the regular security apparatus and have some level of organization."⁴ Some of these forces impose their own priorities on their state's status.

There is an extensive body of literature about subnational forces, which encompasses both groups allied with and opposed to the state. David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan focus on rebels who oppose the government

¹ Patrick H. O'Neil and Ronald Rogowski, *Essential Readings in Comparative Politics*, 5th ed. (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2018), 29.

² "Insurgency," in *Vocabulary.Com*, accessed July 24, 2019, <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/insurgency>.

³ Chris C, "Definition of Terrorism," SecBrief, April 8, 2014, <https://www.secbrief.org/2014/04/definition-of-terrorism/>.

⁴ Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell, "Progovernment Militias," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (2017): 128, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051915-045433>.

in their dataset of non-state actors.⁵ Many authors follow this tack, focusing on rebels opposed to the government. Richard H. Shultz is emblematic of a different strand who look beyond rebels in defining non-state armed groups.⁶ Another pair of authors, Keith Krause and Jennifer Milliken, categorize non-state armed groups as, “(1) insurgent groups; (2) militant groups; (3) urban gangs and warlords; (4) private militias, police forces and security companies; and (5) transnational groups.”⁷ By looking beyond the state / rebel pair, we can better understand the complexity of contemporary conflicts.

I introduce the term “subnational armed groups,” which I define as non-state armed groups that are consistently allied with, although separate from, state forces. These forces are most similar to Krause and Milliken’s group of “private militias, police forces, and security companies.” I say “consistently allied” to distinguish subnational armed groups from rebels who form temporary alliances of convenience with state forces during multi-party civil wars. The test for whether a group is separate from state forces is one of legitimacy; do the members of the armed group view the state or the leader of their armed group as the most legitimate authority? In this way, subnational armed groups are still potential rivals to the state according to Weber’s definition, while at the same time they cooperate with the state.

There are three major arguments about how subnational groups affect civil wars. These views can be summarized in terms of civil war length and termination, the level of violence, and human rights violations.⁸ In general, their impact is seen as negative.

The common negative view, according to Corinna Jentzsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas, and Livia Isabella Schubiger, is that subnational groups can increase civil war length and

⁵ David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, “Non-State Actors in Civil Wars: A New Dataset,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 30, no. 5 (November 2013): 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894213499673>.

⁶ Richard H. Shultz, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias: The Warriors of Contemporary Combat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁷ Keith Krause and Jennifer Milliken, “Introduction: The Challenge of Non-State Armed Groups,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 30, no. 2 (August 1, 2009): 204–205, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260903077296>.

⁸ Corinna Jentzsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas, and Livia Isabella Schubiger, “Militias in Civil Wars,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (August 2015): 759, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715576753>.

delay termination.⁹ The authors believe that activities of subnational actors may prolong a civil war, as researchers have shown that civil wars with multiple insurgents and subnational forces last longer. They also state, in this case, that subnational forces are known by different names such as spoilers and veto players.¹⁰ The authors argue that the duration of civil war may increase because the subnational forces may prevent and complicate negotiation between the government and opposing insurgent groups. They further argue, in the case of the presence of subnational forces, governments have to negotiate some terms with insurgent groups. Simultaneously, the governments have to meet the demands of the subnational forces as those groups have expectations for their services to the government during the civil war. The authors emphasize that when subnational forces are involved in a civil war, the peace process may last for a longer period of time, because the subnational forces make any settlement less decisive. They also believe that civil wars might be prolonged because both the insurgent groups and the subnational forces recruit from the local population, which undercuts the insurgents' recruiting. Thus, the insurgent groups perceive the subnational forces as their primary enemy.

Another negative point is advanced by Huseyn Aliyev, who believes that peace threatens the survival of subnational forces.¹¹ Aliyev found when the subnational groups are obliged to leave armed conflicts, they lose their financial resources and other revenues they were obtaining from illegal activities. He further argues that restoring peace and law and order usually puts an end to the illegal activities that the subnational groups were involved in during the conflicts. For example, he states that a subnational force will be unable to carry out human trafficking, drug and mineral resources trade, and other illicit trafficking to finance its activities. He emphasizes that the presence of subnational forces in internal conflicts and civil wars reduces the likelihood of ending wars and settling peace agreements.

⁹ Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, 760.

¹⁰ Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, 760.

¹¹ Huseyn Aliyev, "'No Peace, No War' Proponents? How Pro-Regime Militias Affect Civil War Termination and Outcomes," *Cooperation and Conflict* 54, no. 1 (2019): 68, 69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836718766380>.

In William I. Zartman's famous formulation, subnational forces can act as "spoilers" in civil wars.¹² Subnational forces reduce the likelihood of either side of a conflict claiming victory.¹³ Furthermore, Mary Kaldor claims that if a government announces victory, it may cause problems for subnational forces, as the termination of the violence and conflicts signals the end of illicit activities and the support of government to these groups. Additionally, Christoph V. Steinert, Janina I. Steinert, and Sabine C. Carey find that when governments want to make their own constituency the sole legal body that can use violence, subnational forces often believe that it is against their interests, because it endangers the flow of recruitment, increases the likelihood of dissolving, and reduces illicit income and government funding.¹⁴ Subnational forces might share some goals with their governments, but their ultimate goals might not be the same. Therefore, the subnational forces will keep their prerogatives and will try to stay as independent forces.

Another negative view about subnational forces is that they impede peace processes because they fear retribution for war crimes. According to Aliyev, because subnational forces are involved in inhuman actions, they know that after the end of war they will likely be prosecuted.¹⁵ Therefore, he says that the subnational forces may continuously put barriers in front of the peace process. Aliyev discusses that in the case of announcing victory, if the governments do not prosecute the subnational group members who have committed human rights abuses against civilians, the civilians will turn their support to groups that rebel against the government. Also, when people support rebels and the governments lose the support of their citizens, governments lose their source of legitimacy internationally, which makes the announcement of victory unlikely.¹⁶ This means that

¹² William I. Zartman, *Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹³ Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, 3rd ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Christoph V. Steinert, Janina I. Steinert, and Sabine C. Carey, "Spoilers of Peace: Pro-Government Militias as Risk Factors for Conflict Recurrence," *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 2 (March 2019): 252–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343318800524>.

¹⁵ Huseyn Aliyev, "Why Are Some Civil Wars More Lethal Than Others? The Effect of Pro-Regime Proxies on Conflict Lethality," *Political Studies*, 2019, 8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719862752>.

¹⁶ Aliyev, "Why Are Some Civil Wars More Lethal Than Others?," 9.

when governments delay the announcement of victory, the only ones to benefit are the subnational groups while the governments may lose their position among nations.

According to Sabine C. Carey, Michael P. Colaresi, and Neil J. Mitchell, subnational forces increase the number of the people who get killed during the conflicts and such forces also increase the violence during wars.¹⁷ They maintain that the number of casualties and the lethality of a war can become greater when subnational forces participate in conflicts, as they can be used as a tool for suppressing civilians. They believe that when subnational forces are deployed, they may try to collect information on and conduct selective killing of the advocates and the sympathizers of the insurgency groups through their death squads. They contend that deployment of subnational forces then causes more conflicts with the insurgency groups and escalation of the violence.¹⁸ Research has shown that the larger the number contributing to the fighting, the more lethal the fighting becomes.¹⁹

Aliyev believes that there are two main ways that the participation of subnational forces may make civil wars more lethal. First, because subnational forces are not as well trained or equipped as the formal state, it is expected that the number of casualties will increase.²⁰ Steinert et al. agree with Aliyev as the members of these forces are mainly untrained and join subnational forces based on personal preferences.²¹ Aliyev also believes that although an allied subnational group is an effective force multiplier, its shortcomings ensure that casualties also multiply. He states that the casualties caused by a subnational force may make the government conduct retaliatory strikes, which will increase the number of casualties within the insurgency forces. This leads to more overall casualties.²² Lack of

¹⁷ Sabine C. Carey, Michael P. Colaresi, and Neil J. Mitchell, "Governments, Informal Links to Militias, and Accountability," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (August 2015): 852, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715576747>.

¹⁸ Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell, 853.

¹⁹ Aliyev, "Why Are Some Civil Wars More Lethal Than Others?," 4.

²⁰ Aliyev, 4.

²¹ Steinert, Steinert, and Carey, "Spoilers of Peace," 252.

²² Aliyev, "Why Are Some Civil Wars More Lethal Than Others?," 4–6.

training makes the subnational forces suffer more casualties. In most cases governments use these forces in order not to deploy government forces. The subnational forces are allied with government, but their lack of qualifications and skills increase the death toll.

In other cases, as Aliyev says, the government forces and the subnational forces stationed in areas from which the insurgents receive their support from may weaken the insurgent groups.²³ He believes that this may make the insurgent groups change tactics, and instead of facing forces inside the areas of their support, the insurgents may withdraw and ask for negotiation. As a result, when the government settles the peace with insurgents, the subnational forces will see themselves marginalized. Consequently, subnational forces will start attacking insurgents and breaking the peace between the government and the insurgents.²⁴

Other scholars including Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger believe that subnational groups can foster human rights violations.²⁵ Indeed, subnational armed groups are frequently accused of committing human rights violations. The participation of subnational forces in civil war causes states to lose their monopoly on power, which changes the quality of democracy and the outcomes of the process of states and nation building.²⁶ According to the authors, the relationship between the population and subnational forces within the community where they operate varies in terms of providing merchandise and services, and the violence committed against the citizens. For example, some subnational forces might start operating as the protector of the civilians, but this goal may change over time. The authors state that subnational forces commit violence against civilians and become their predators. Sometimes, subnational forces violate human rights for their own objectives; other times they commit atrocities and abuse human rights on behalf of their governments.²⁷

²³ Aliyev, 8.

²⁴ Aliyev, 8.

²⁵ Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, "Militias in Civil Wars," 756–57.

²⁶ Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, 756–57.

²⁷ Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, 758.

According to Jentzsch et al., subnational forces are the perpetrators of civil war violations. When governments delegate security missions to the subnational forces, they may increase the number of human rights abuses because of loss of control of states over these groups.²⁸ Subnational forces are often valuable intelligence resources; therefore, they might use this privilege to increase selective violence. The authors also argue that some subnational forces are more prone to human rights abuses than others because of their internal structure. For example, the recruitment level may increase the probability of certain types of a subnational forces' activities.²⁹ They further argue that the subnational forces' recruitments within the same social community will reduce the likelihood of targeting civilians, as this will mean targeting their own community. On the other hand, when subnational groups internally do not conduct screening for their newly recruited members who might have engaged in human rights abuses, they may resort to these actions in the future as well.³⁰ The length and the intensity of fights in this case determine the severity of human rights abuses. The authors believe that, because the subnational groups are not organizationally attached to the governments, governments get a plausible element of deniability. The authors argue that because the subnational forces are symmetric, obtaining information from them about the human rights abuses is difficult. Because of this loose relationship, governments often get away with human right abuses, and investigations cannot easily accuse governments with perpetrating such abuses.³¹ According to the authors, "in world politics, accountability for most power-wielders is likely to be less constrained than is optimal."³²

²⁸ Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, 761.

²⁹ Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, 761.

³⁰ Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, 762.

³¹ Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell, "Governments, Informal Links to Militias, and Accountability," 852.

³² Ruth W. Grant and Robert O. Keohane, "Accountability and Abuses of Power in World Politics," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (2005): 40.

Carey and Mitchell also argue that the informal link between governments and subnational forces increases the probability of human rights abuses.³³ When governments decide to delegate the security mission to subnational groups, the “daylight” between the government and the subnational groups decreases and is even further lowered when this task is delegated to a subnational group that has informal links with the government.³⁴ Thus, the risk of human rights abuses is higher with the informal groups. When the link between the government and the subnational forces is informal, the government will task the responsibility of committing violations such as mass murder, torture, and abduction of non-aligned citizens to the subnational forces.³⁵ Thus, governments can blame subnational forces and claim that there is no relation between the government and the subnational forces. The nature of the relations between the governments and the subnational forces shows that sometimes governments may not be able to or willing to control these forces.³⁶

Scholars also believe that when governments lose control over subnational groups, militia groups will work outside the government. Consequently, these subnational forces will commit human rights violations.³⁷

While the literature emphasizes negative views about subnational forces, there are those who view subnational forces as a net positive. The positive aspects of subnational groups allied with the state can be shown in the case of the Kurdish Peshmerga. The Peshmerga of the Kurdistan Region are fighters whose name means “those who face death,” and they numbered around 190,000 fighters when the war against ISIS erupted.³⁸

³³ Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell, “The Monopoly of Violence and the Puzzling Survival of Pro-Government Militias,” paper submitted to *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2016, 19, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54d49799e4b0b97e05e90186/t/56a5e5831a5203313c39dcc8/1453712794730/Carey+and+Mitchell+ARPS+online.pdf>.

³⁴ Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell, 19.

³⁵ Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell, 20.

³⁶ Carey and Mitchell, “Progovernment Militias,” 134.

³⁷ Jessica A. Stanton, “Regulating Militias: Governments, Militias, and Civilian Targeting in Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (August 2015): 900, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715576751>.

³⁸ “Profile: Who Are the Peshmerga?,” BBC News, August 12, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28738975>.

The main task of the Peshmerga forces was fighting the Iraqi regimes for the rights of Kurds and their freedom.³⁹ The role and the name of the Kurdish Peshmerga was in general overlooked by scholars until the emergence of ISIS in Iraq in 2014 and onward, when the Peshmerga became one of the main forces fighting ISIS.⁴⁰ American forces, on the other hand, have considered the Peshmerga as effective and reliable allies since 2003, when Peshmerga forces effectively participated in the war against the Iraqi regime and assisted the U.S. troops in the Fallujah assault in 2004. The Peshmerga's contact with European partners formed a tighter bond between the two.⁴¹ Irrespective of the statute of the Peshmerga force as a subnational force, the effectiveness of the Peshmerga force in countering ISIS terrorism put Peshmerga forces in a position that can be relied upon internally and internationally.⁴² According to Marianna Charountaki, the role of Peshmerga forces in countering ISIS terrorism was further enhanced and enforced with the support of the U.S-led coalition.⁴³ This coalition helped in providing training and equipment to the Peshmerga forces. The airstrikes that were conducted by the coalition forces also increased the effectiveness of Peshmerga in countering ISIS terrorism.

Scholars like Charountaki, Jessica A. Stanton, and Chelsea Estancona see subnational groups that are allied to the state as capable of producing positive outcomes.⁴⁴ According to Stanton, sometimes subnational forces safeguard civilians and provide protection for them. She believes in some cases the government forces are more prone to attack civilians, but subnational forces do not attack civilians.⁴⁵ She further argues that when governments try to avoid the consequences of the violations, they will task the violent actions to subnational forces; but in some cases, the subnational forces will reject human

³⁹ Marianna Charountaki, "From Resistance to Military Institutionalisation: The Case of the Peshmerga versus the Islamic State," *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 8 (August 2018): 1583, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1449633>.

⁴⁰ Charountaki, 1585.

⁴¹ Charountaki, 1588–89.

⁴² Charountaki, 1598.

⁴³ Charountaki, 1585.

⁴⁴ Charountaki, 1587; Stanton, "Regulating Militias," 903.

⁴⁵ Stanton, "Regulating Militias," 901.

rights violations. This is especially likely when the subnational forces recruit from the constituency that supports the insurgents, where the subnational groups are unlikely to suppress their own communities. Similarly, when communities face the attacks from insurgent groups, the civilians of these communities take up arms and fight the insurgency on behalf of their governments. In this case, the government will pay for the civilians to become a self-defense force. Therefore, some subnational forces seem to be potentially positive.⁴⁶

Civilians will often make their own forces and will resist invaders.⁴⁷ When they resist rebel groups, governments may view self-defense subnational forces as reliable partners. According to Estancona, the self-defense groups are considered effective as they are familiar with the nature of their community and they can obtain intelligence about the rebels within or nearby their communities.⁴⁸ She believes self-defense groups in some cases are considered more active than the government forces because, first, when the governments are weak, constrained by budget and inefficient, they delegate fighting rebels to these groups. Second, these groups possess better knowledge about their areas, and that means more intelligence at lower cost. Third, these groups and the rebels recruit from the same community. Therefore, the self-defense groups may get better information about the rebels in comparison to what rebel groups possess.⁴⁹ She emphasizes that when the governments increase their support for the self-defense groups, the government will not leave a chance to an alliance between the rebels and the citizens, thus, undermining the probability of the insurgents to infringe on the territory and turn the power in their favor. This is the strategy behind the government's providing support to self-defense groups.⁵⁰

Subnational forces can, under the right circumstances, have positive impacts on civil war termination and the respect for human rights. The correct investment and

⁴⁶ Stanton, 905.

⁴⁷ Chelsea Estancona et al., "Civilian Self-Defense Militias in Civil War," *International Interactions* 45, no. 2 (March 2019): 215–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2019.1554570>.

⁴⁸ Estancona et al., 215–16.

⁴⁹ Estancona et al., 217–18.

⁵⁰ Estancona et al., 220.

deployment of subnational forces might make them a strong allied force with democratic countries.

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

This thesis explores and explains how the Peshmerga forces defied the negative trends associated with subnational forces and contributed positively to the war against ISIS in Iraq. It argues that the combination of support and training from democratic countries as well as substantial command and control capabilities helped prevent the Peshmerga from engaging in anti-civilian atrocities. The thesis explores and substantiates the following hypotheses.

1. Hypothesis 1

International support to the Peshmerga and training by democratic states that emphasize respect for human rights and civilian immunity resulted in fewer atrocities committed by the Peshmerga in their prosecution of the war against ISIS.

2. Hypothesis 2

Robust command and control capabilities within the Peshmerga forces helped prevent human rights violations and other forms of militant predation.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

The thesis describes three major offensive operations conducted by the Peshmerga forces against ISIS: the al-Rabia Operation, Shingal Operation, and Bashiqa Operation. It analyzes the effectiveness of the Peshmerga forces in combating terrorism during these three episodes of the civil war. It draws on unclassified data, mainly thinktank reports, news articles, and Arabic and Kurdish language sources and papers of record.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

Chapter I has presented the background and literature review about subnational forces. Chapter II focuses on the introduction of the Peshmerga forces and some general details about the historical background of the Peshmerga as the subnational force of the

case study. The Peshmerga forces are only known through major incidents.⁵¹ Chapter III focuses on the introduction and general historical background about ISIS as a new phenomenon, the ideology of ISIS, and why ISIS decided to attack Kurdistan Region. The emergence of ISIS is somewhat new and needs further investigation, which is provided in this research. Chapter IV is the collection of three major offensive operations of the Peshmerga forces against the ISIS terrorist group. Details of these operations consist of the leadership of the Peshmerga in each of the offensives, the number of Peshmerga fighters who participated in each operation, and the number of airstrikes conducted by coalition forces in each of these operations. Finally, Chapter V provides an analysis of the three major offensive operations of the Peshmerga forces against the ISIS terrorist group. This chapter also summarizes the analysis and findings of the previous chapters and provides a conclusion for the research. The goal of this chapter is finding ways to pay more attention to the subnational forces that can be good allies, in addition to national armies, in the case of combating terrorism. Especially, when the national army is defeated in a war, these forces can have a vital role in facing terrorism. The concluding chapter considers the hypotheses stated in the introduction and offers the study's major takeaways, in addition to making recommendations to policy makers.

⁵¹ The term “Peshmerga” refers mainly to those people who have deployed to Iraq and either worked or had some kind of military relation with the Peshmerga. The major incidents that made the name of the Peshmerga significant are the liberation of Iraq in 2003 and the War on ISIS terrorist group through Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), which was dedicated to war on ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Due to the participation of the Peshmerga force under the umbrella of this operation, the name of Peshmerga came into the spotlight. But its significance was mainly military in nature and needs more investigation academically.

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II. THE HISTORY OF THE PESHMERGA

A. INTRODUCTION

Kurdish leaders have had to defend their nationalist movement throughout the 20th century; the Peshmerga has been the means by which this defense was accomplished. Although they were officially founded in 1943 by Mulla Mustafa Barzani,⁵² the Peshmerga's roots reach back to the earlier rebellion of Shiekh Mahmoud Barzinji. These Kurdish forces were formed from cavaliers and tribal groups that were deployed during the conquests of the imperialistic powers, especially during the era of the Ottoman Empire.⁵³ As previously mentioned, the Peshmerga is the military force of the Kurdistan Region whose name means "those who face death."⁵⁴

This chapter focuses on the development of the Peshmerga during the leadership of Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the founder and leader who set the foundations for the contemporary Peshmerga forces. Nevertheless, other political leaders, like Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, led the Peshmerga forces in important venues of the Kurdish struggle. Additionally, other political parties like the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) contributed to the Kurdish struggle until the war against ISIS. Yet, as Michael G. Lortz notes, despite the effectiveness of these leaders and political parties, Peshmerga forces were fragmented and divided during the conflict between these parties, for example, during the engagement of the Peshmerga forces in the political parties' conflicts during the 1970s, and the civil war between 1995 and 1998.⁵⁵

⁵² Nader Entessar, "The Kurdish Mosaic of Discord," *Third World Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1989): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436598908420193>.

⁵³ Entessar, 83.

⁵⁴ Michael G. Lortz, *Willing to Face Death: A History of Kurdish Military Forces- the Peshmerga – From the Ottoman Empire to Present-Day-Iraq* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University, 2005), 1, http://purl.flvc.org/fsu/fd/FSU_migr_etd-1038.

⁵⁵ Lortz, 53, 63.

B. THE FOUR STAGES OF PESHMERGA DEVELOPMENT

The development of the Peshmerga forces went through four different stages. The initial stage includes the Kurdish remnant units of the Ottoman Empire to the World War I era and initial Kurdish national revolts (1891–1961). In the second stage, the classic insurgency (1961–1975), the Peshmerga fought a unified guerilla campaign against the Iraqi governments. Third, Peshmerga in the fragmentation stage (1975–1991), external forces divided the Peshmerga and drove them into exile. Finally, the Peshmerga became unified and institutionalized within the KRG in Iraq after the establishment of the ministry of Peshmerga (1991 to present day).

1. The Ottoman Empire to the World War I Era and Initial Kurdish National Revolts (1891–1961)

With the end of the Ottoman Empire, the British divided Kurdistan among four countries (Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria). Lortz explains that in 1918, Britain created an independent Kurdish state that limited the role of British authorities to political and administrative advice, leaving Kurds responsible for sectors such as the military, the judiciary, and revenue. The British authorities changed their mind about a Kurdish independent state, however, when oil was found in Kirkuk and other areas. Lortz records that numerous Kurdish officers within the British formation resigned. This exploitation of Kurdish forces led to revolts in areas inhabited by Kurds. These revolts included the revolt of Sheikh Saeed of Palu in Northern Kurdistan and the revolt of Sheikh Mahmoud Barznji in Southern Kurdistan. These revolts are important as they would eventually result in the future establishment of the modern Peshmerga as a force for political change in their respective geographical locations.⁵⁶ The roots of Sheikh Mahmoud's revolt lie with the peace settlement of World War I. Furthermore, the awakening of nationalism starts with the emergence of Sheikh Mahmoud and Mulla Mustafa.

⁵⁶ Lortz, 9–10.

a. *The Revolt of Sheikh Mahmoud Barznji*

Before the revolt of Sheikh Mahmoud, there was little nationalism among the Kurds. Like the Ottoman Empire, British authorities took advantage of Kurds, and this made the Kurds revolt. One of the first nationalist revolutions was the revolt of Sheikh Mahmoud Barznji in 1919, when he brought down the flag of British occupation.⁵⁷ Furthermore, he asked the Kurds to join his revolution, and was able to seize control of the Sulaymaniyah governorate and asked Kurds from other Kurdish areas to join his revolt and gave himself the position of ruler of all Kurdistan. One of those recruits was Mustafa Barzani, who joined this revolt at the age of 16.⁵⁸ Mulla Mustafa Barzani joined the revolt based on orders from his elder brother Sheikh Ahmed Barzani. Ahmed Barzani, known as “Khudan,” sent 500 fighters alongside Mulla Mustafa Barzani.⁵⁹ The initial revolt of Sheikh Mahmoud failed, but his fighters continued to fight British soldiers as guerillas. Later, the revolt forced the British to recognize Kurdish autonomy in 1923.⁶⁰ The British, however, did not comply with their promise, and the armed conflicts between Sheikh Mahmoud and British forces continued until 1931.⁶¹ After the British recognized the state of Iraq, the Kurds resisted the Arab government of Iraq, which was imposed by the mandate of 1930.⁶² The British helped the weak Iraqi government and ended the Kurdish revolution that was demanding an independent Kurdish state.⁶³

In addition to the revolt of Sheikh Mahmoud, other Kurdish nationalist revolts took place in Northern Kurdistan (now part of Turkey). These revolts used the tactics that the

⁵⁷ Hataw Hama Saleh Hussein, “The Role of News Media in Supporting Democracy in Kurdistan Region” (PhD. diss., Nottingham Trent University, 2018), 70, <http://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/34661/>.

⁵⁸ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 10–11.

⁵⁹ Lortz, 11.

⁶⁰ Lortz, 12.

⁶¹ Hussein, “The Role of News Media in Supporting Democracy in Kurdistan Region,” 71.

⁶² Hamdy Alias Singary, “The Kurdish Way to Attain Nation Building and Oil Rights Through the Constitution and the United States” (PhD. diss., University of Arizona, 2008), 19, <https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/631494>.

⁶³ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: IB Tauris, 1996), 173–78.

Kurdish fighters learned from the era of the Hamidiyah cavalry, during Ottoman rule.⁶⁴ Also, the Kurdish fighters learned how to use guerilla and nonconventional tactics in their fight against the Turkish government.⁶⁵ The armed movement represented the national movement of the Kurds through the call of Sheikh Saeed, who asked different Kurdish leaders to join his revolt. As Lortz writes, in 1925, one of the main leaders who joined this revolt was Mulla Mustafa Barzani.⁶⁶ The other revolt was the Khoyboun (independence) in Mountain Ararat between 1927–1930.⁶⁷ The leader of the Khoyboun revolt asked for Kurdish support and one of the forces that provided support was that of Sheikh Ahmed Barzani, who led 500 fighters to help the Khoyboun revolt.⁶⁸

According to Lortz, the Khoyboun revolt did not meet its end goals, but this revolt was important for the future of the Peshmerga for three reasons.⁶⁹ First, the tribal identity of Kurdish forces was changed to a national identity. Second, the revolt strengthened the Barzani tribe and helped them to become more exposed to Kurdish nationalism. This relation helped in enhancing support for the Peshmerga force in the Barzan area, which led to today's Peshmerga force. Finally, this revolt made Kurdish leaders more cautious about sparking revolts in other countries because of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. During Khoyboun, these countries came together to suppress the Kurdish revolt, which they could do in the future.

In 1931, the Iraqi government decided to attack Barzan when they realized that the popularity of the Barzani tribe was rising and other tribes had joined them. Therefore, in December 1931, the Iraqi army asked the Barzani leaders, especially Sheikh Ahmed and

⁶⁴ Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 1–2, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=692463>.

⁶⁵ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 14–15.

⁶⁶ Lortz, 13–14.

⁶⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 202–207.

⁶⁸ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 16.

⁶⁹ Lortz, 17–19.

his younger brother Mulla Mustafa, to surrender.⁷⁰ But they decided to fight the Iraqi army through conducting surprise attacks. Mulla Mustafa Barzani demonstrated his leadership capability in scoring several crucial and impressive victories.⁷¹ He had demonstrated himself as a skillful, formidable, and a strong military leader.⁷² After some allied tribes betrayed Barzan, the Iraqi army managed to defeat the Barzani tribe. Mulla Mustafa Barzani fled to outside the Barzan area and was exposed to other tribes and nations, which enhanced his military capabilities and his nationalistic ideology.⁷³ These military capabilities provided him with the tools that he needed to always rise militarily against the Iraqi army and continue his struggle.

b. The Emergence of the Military/Nationalist Movement of Mulla Mustafa Barzani: The 1943–45 Uprising

In 1943, Mulla Mustafa Barzani left his exile in Sulaymaniyah and returned to his village in Barzan alongside his force.⁷⁴ Barzani started gathering forces to resume his struggle against the Iraqi army. Two months after his return to Barzan, his force grew to 2,000 fighters, after controlling a vast area in the vicinity of Barzan village.⁷⁵ The Prime Minister in Baghdad, Hamdi al-Pachachi, sent the Iraqi army to Mountain Qalandar, where Barzani and his fighters defeated that Iraqi force again.⁷⁶ Yet, the victories did not last as the Iraqi government enticed other tribes to betray Barzani's military movement.⁷⁷ Thus, the military conflict between Barzani and the Iraqi army, backed by the British Royal Air Force (RAF), ended in 1945 and Barzani crossed the border to Iran.⁷⁸

⁷⁰ Dennis P. Chapman, "Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government," Fellowship Project (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2009), 42, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a510826.pdf>.

⁷¹ Chapman, 41–42.

⁷² Chapman, 42.

⁷³ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 20.

⁷⁴ Lortz, 20.

⁷⁵ Lortz, 22.

⁷⁶ Lortz, 24.

⁷⁷ Lortz, 25.

⁷⁸ Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Ethnonationalism* (Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 1992), 56.

The uprising of Mulla Mustafa Barzani was important in terms of military development and nationalism for three main reasons. First, although Barzani had already proved his military capabilities, this time he was able to demonstrate his capability in planning, dividing military forces under his command, and establishing and setting proper command and control.⁷⁹ Secondly, unlike before, Barzani's demands were more national than tribal. Thirdly, Barzani demanded autonomous provinces for Kurds to include Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, Kirkuk, and Khanaqin. Finally, these provinces were to be managed under the authority of a Kurdish minister.⁸⁰ On the other hand, the 1943–1945 uprising of Barzani failed when Barzani and his forces left the Barzan area and headed to Mahabad; they joined the Kurdish movement that was about to announce a republic. The 1940s were undoubtedly crucial for the history of the Peshmerga, as Mulla Mustafa Barzani created what is known now as the Peshmerga.⁸¹

c. *The Kurdish Republic in Mahabad*

The credentials of Mulla Mustafa Barzani increased in the Kurdish nationalism movement with the revolt of 1943–1945, but it was further boosted with his participation in founding of the Kurdish Republic in 1946 in Mahabad.⁸² Barzani's force crossed the Iraq-Iran border to support the Kurdish Republic, becoming the main military pillar of the republic.⁸³ The military participation of Mulla Mustafa Barzani was important in terms of bringing 1,200 of his fighters to support the republic. With his knowledge and military position, Barzani was appointed as the Republic's chief of staff of the army.⁸⁴ In 1945, the leader of the Kurdish Republic, Qazi Muhammed, met with the Soviet Union and asked for their help in building an independent state for the Kurds in Mahabad. The Soviets agreed to support the Kurds with military equipment, training, and financial support, to ensure that

⁷⁹ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 25–26.

⁸⁰ Chapman, "Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government," 44.

⁸¹ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 25.

⁸² Chapman, "Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government," 45.

⁸³ Entessar, *Kurdish Ethnonationalism*, 20.

⁸⁴ Chapman, "Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government," 45–46.

the Kurds would be able to keep their autonomy in Iran.⁸⁵ With the cooperation of Barzani and some other leaders, on January 22, 1946, Qazi Muhammed became the president of the first Kurdish Republic in Mahabad. For the first time a Kurdish government was formed, and a national flag of Kurdistan came into existence.⁸⁶ Also, on August 16, 1946, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was formed. Formation of this party in addition to the leadership impacted the future of the Peshmerga, as they become modernized with the support of the Soviets.⁸⁷

After the establishment of the Kurdish Republic in Mahabad, President Qazi Muhammed deployed the military forces to the boundaries of the republic. One of the forces that was deployed to the southeast flank was the Barzani force, which was deployed to Qahrawa.⁸⁸ During the first conflict, the Peshmerga scored a victory against the Iranian army. Nevertheless, these victories did not last long when the Soviets withdrew from Iran and stopped their support to the Peshmerga in May 1946. Additionally, some of the Kurdish tribes, especially the tribes of Shikak and Herki, withdrew their support for the republic of Mahabad after they started drifting away from the Kurdish Republic.⁸⁹

The setbacks of losing the support of the tribes and the withdrawal of the Soviets from Iran made Barzani forces retreat further and Barzani asked Qazi Muhammed to accompany him, but Qazi refused.⁹⁰ On December 17, 1946, a force of the Iranian Army entered the city of Mahabad and ended the Kurdish Republic. After taking over Mahabad and the demise of the Kurdish Republic, on March 31, 1947, Qazi Muhammed, his brother, and his cousins were hanged in the town square of Mahabad.⁹¹

⁸⁵ Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, Contemporary Issues in the Middle East (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981), 12.

⁸⁶ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 28.

⁸⁷ Chapman, "Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government," 47.

⁸⁸ Chapman, 46.

⁸⁹ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 30.

⁹⁰ Chapman, "Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government," 47.

⁹¹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 245.

According to David McDowall, after the failure of the Kurdish republic, Barzani fought his way through the border of Iran and Turkey and marched with 300 of his fighters between the Irani-Turkish border for 220 miles and then crossed the Araxes River to arrive safely in the Soviet Union on June 15, 1947.⁹² Through this move, Barzani demonstrated his superlative military and tactical capability, which made him a legend and demonstrated his ability to survive and return.

According to Dennis P. Chapman, Barzani's forces were the largest and the most disciplined in the Kurdish republic's army. His forces were organized, well-armed, and arranged within formal military regiments. Furthermore, Barzani's forces were able to conduct some successful assaults.⁹³ Upon their arrival in Mahabad, the Barzani Peshmerga were only armed with Brno rifles, and lacked military organization. After their arrival, Peshmerga forces went through training courses and organized within the regiments. Lortz highlights that among other advantages that the Peshmerga received from their participation in Mahabad was using the term Peshmerga for the soldiers rather than the Persian term of *Sarbaz*.⁹⁴ Thus, the morale of the Peshmerga increased, and they became more motivated to fight for their nation. Finally, the author states, during Mahabad's republic, some Kurdish officers who graduated from military academies in Iraq and Iran joined the Peshmerga forces and effectively merged with Peshmerga units.⁹⁵ These officers effectively worked alongside the officers and other personnel within the Peshmerga forces. Thus, the Peshmerga was united in service of the Kurdish national cause, having grown beyond their previous duties as tribal forces defending their own interests.⁹⁶ Despite the failure, the republic of Mahabad helped in advancing the military capabilities of Barzani and the Peshmerga. The republic of Mahabad enhanced the leadership capabilities of Barzani, and the Peshmerga forces benefited from the military training, equipment, and financial support that they received from the Soviets.

⁹² McDowall, 246.

⁹³ Chapman, "Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government," 46.

⁹⁴ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 34.

⁹⁵ Lortz, 34.

⁹⁶ Lortz, 34.

d. *Mulla Mustafa Barzani's and His Fellow Peshmerga's Time in the Soviet Union*

The time that Mulla Mustafa Barzani and his fighters spent in the Soviet Union (1947–1958) hardly improved their already dire situation.⁹⁷ The Peshmerga of Barzani were taken to a compound and dealt with as war prisoners; their leader Mustafa Barzani was separated from them and was sent to Nakhichevan, Soviet Armenia, then to Baku, Soviet Azerbaijan. Eventually, some of the Peshmerga of the Barzani force were sent to Baku and went through military training and were reorganized.⁹⁸ The training included basic military training and conducting operations under the supervision of the Soviet officers.

Subsequently, Barzani and his fellow Peshmerga were sent to Tashkent, Soviet Uzbekistan. There Barzani's comrades took advantage of the opportunity to improve their literacy; some finished their higher education. Mulla Mustafa Barzani became known as the Kurdish leader there and was given the chance to broadcast his messages advocating Kurdish nationalism via Soviet radio in Uzbekistan.⁹⁹ The uprising of the Iraqi Brigadier Abd al Karim Qasim ended the rule of the monarchs in 1958 and set the stage for the return of Barzani, as Qasim pardoned Barzani and Sheikh Ahmed. Thus, the time that Barzani and his comrades spent in the Soviet Union enabled personnel to undergo military training and improve their skills.¹⁰⁰ These Peshmerga personnel participated in the future conflicts against Iraqi regimes.

e. *The End of the Monarchy and the Start of the Iraqi Republic (1958–1960)*

After the end of the royal era in Iraq and the arrival of Abd al Karim Qasim, the July 27 provisional constitution was declared. Article 23 stated that “The Kurds and the Arabs are partners within this nation. The constitution guarantees their rights within the

⁹⁷ Lortz, 35.

⁹⁸ Chapman, “Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government,” 59.

⁹⁹ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 35.

¹⁰⁰ Lortz, 35–36.

framework of the Iraqi Republic.”¹⁰¹ Thus, Mulla Mustafa Barzani returned to Iraq as the hero of the Kurds and Arabs. Many of the Peshmerga were appointed to leadership positions in the army.¹⁰² One of the main gains of the collaboration between Qasim and Barzani’s Peshmerga was adding the Kurdish sun flag to the Iraqi flag.¹⁰³ In 1961, however, conflict between Qasim and the Kurds began.

2. The Peshmerga during the Classic Insurgency (1961–1975)

In July 1961, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, on behalf of the Kurds, petitioned the Iraqi government for autonomous rights. Fearing that the Shiite population of Iraq would have similar demands, Qasim rejected the demands.¹⁰⁴ In response, on September 11, 1961, the Kurdish conflict against the Iraqi regime erupted.¹⁰⁵

According to Lortz, by the end of 1961, the Peshmerga forces had seized control of most of the areas in Iraqi Kurdistan.¹⁰⁶ Other Kurdish tribes sided with Barzani. These new forces were taught how to conduct guerrilla attacks against the Iraqi army. At the start of the conflict a third of the Iraqi army personnel were ethnically Kurds, leading them to defect from the army and join the Peshmerga forces.¹⁰⁷ Hence, they helped in further organizing and professionalizing the Peshmerga. Barzani reorganized these troops into smaller and more controllable units and assigned some experienced and some of the defected officers as commanders.¹⁰⁸ Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the Peshmerga commanders learned how to establish good communication for the command and control of their units.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰¹ Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, 38.

¹⁰² Ghareeb, 38.

¹⁰³ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 38.

¹⁰⁴ Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, 39.

¹⁰⁵ Chapman, “Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government,” 66.

¹⁰⁶ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 39.

¹⁰⁷ Lortz, 40.

¹⁰⁸ Chapman, “Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government,” 67.

¹⁰⁹ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 41.

After the success of Baath al Arabi al Ishtraki (Arab Renaissance Social Party) in overthrowing the Qasim regime on February 8, 1963,¹¹⁰ the party did not discuss the question of other minorities deeply.¹¹¹ At the beginning of the Baathist rule, Mulla Mustafa Barzani presented his demands for the rights of the Kurdish people to the new government. Also, as a good will gesture, both sides called a ceasefire.¹¹² Thus, both sides started their negotiation on March 5, 1963, but after only three days of tensions, armed conflicts erupted between the Peshmerga and the Iraqi army.¹¹³ The second wave of the attack on Kurdistan started when the Iraqi army under control of Baathists launched attacks on key positions, and Iraq announced a general curfew in the majorly Kurdish-populated cities.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, the Article 23 of the July 27 provisional constitution was changed by the Baathists as well, now stating that, “The Iraqi people are a part of the Arab people, whose aim is total Arab unity.”¹¹⁵

Despite the ceasefire of February 12, 1964, and another round of negotiation between the Kurdish leadership and Baathist leaders of Iraq, armed conflict dominated the era between 1963–1965.¹¹⁶ The aforementioned also helped Peshmerga leadership in forming the Peshmerga units in more organized and standard units, such as the squad (*dasta*), a unit of ten Peshmerga fighters; platoon (*pal*), a unit of 50 Peshmerga fighters; company (*sarpal*), a unit of 150 Peshmerga fighters; battalion (*liq*), a unit of 350 fighters; and regiment or brigade (*sarliq*), a unit of 1,000 Peshmerga fighters. Additionally, a central command and control headquarters was designated for Peshmerga leadership and Mulla Mustafa Barzani presided over this headquarters that oversaw the operations.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, 44.

¹¹¹ Ghareeb, 53.

¹¹² Ghareeb, 58.

¹¹³ Ghareeb, 59.

¹¹⁴ Edgar O’Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle, 1920–94* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 65–66, <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780312160067>.

¹¹⁵ Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, 40.

¹¹⁶ O’Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle, 1920–94*, 70–73.

¹¹⁷ Chapman, “Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government,” 68–70.

Furthermore, in 1966 a publication was issued for further organization of Peshmerga, titled, *Prepared to Die: The Story of the Kurdish Revolution in Iraqi Kurdistan*. According to Chapman, this document defined the Peshmerga as the Kurdish National Army and the Command Council of the Revolution (CCR), commanded by Mulla Mustafa Barzani, as its political head.¹¹⁸ This step was important as it set the foundation for more advances in the institutions of the Peshmerga. This military organization was important in increasing the effectiveness of the Peshmerga as the clear structure of command and control helped in making orders clearer and easier to apply. Thus, this robust command and control helped Peshmerga forces to achieve major demands of Kurdish people in later years.

After a round of armed conflict, in late 1969, the Baath Party started negotiations with Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the sides came to an agreement to stop armed conflicts. According to this agreement, the Iraqi government would help in forming a military institution for Peshmerga named “The Frontier Militia Force,” which primarily was composed of 6,000 veteran Peshmerga.¹¹⁹ Additionally, 8,000 of the Peshmerga men who were not included within the new institution received their monthly payment and housing from the Iraqi government.¹²⁰ Thus, the aforementioned institution further advanced the reorganization of the Peshmerga.

The calm and stable environment between the Kurds and the Iraqi regime was further cemented with the March 1970 manifesto, signed on March 11, 1970.¹²¹ The Iraqi leadership and Mulla Mustafa Barzani agreed upon a resolution that solved many of the Kurdish national demands. This manifesto recognized a share of the national, organizational, economic, and administrative stakes within the Iraqi government, self-governance, and military advantages for the Peshmerga.¹²² This era of stability and tranquility prevailed until 1974.

¹¹⁸ Chapman, 70–71.

¹¹⁹ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 47.

¹²⁰ Lortz, 47.

¹²¹ Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, 87.

¹²² Ghareeb, 87–91.

3. The Peshmerga during the Fragmentation Period (1975–1991)

Between 1974 and 1975, the crisis reemerged between the Iraqi government and the Kurds. In 1974, the Iraqi government did not fully abide by the manifesto of 1970, and kept some issues unsolved, like control over the city of Kirkuk and the future of the Peshmerga.¹²³ Additionally, in 1974, the Iraqi government tried to target Mulla Mustafa Barzani on different occasions.¹²⁴ Failing to fulfill the Kurds' demands mentioned in the manifesto, the government of Iraq imposed the Autonomy Law on the Kurdish region on March 11, 1974.¹²⁵ Knowing that the Iraqi government would not fulfill its promise of complying with the manifesto of 1970, Barzani knew that conflict was imminent. Thus, he prepared a force of 50–60,000 Peshmerga fighters and took advantage of foreign aid to strengthen his forces to face the Iraqi threat.¹²⁶ With a larger and more organized force, Barzani ordered his forces to resort to conventional warfare to face the Iraqi army head on, and the Peshmerga were able to seize control of more areas.¹²⁷

The 1975 rebellion was defeated politically with the Accord of Algeria. Saddam Hussein met with the Shah of Iran during an OPEC meeting and agreed to settle their border disputes by redrawing the demarcations of Shat al Arab, maintaining a strong border security, and preventing infiltration of armed groups from both sides,¹²⁸ thus ending the Iranian infiltration and stopping Iranian support of the Peshmerga. After the termination of Iranian support, other countries including the United States also stopped their support. This retreat is sometimes known among the Peshmerga as the “Kissinger Betrayal” because of U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s perceived role.¹²⁹

¹²³ Entessar, *Kurdish Ethnonationalism*, 72.

¹²⁴ Chapman, “Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government,” 74.

¹²⁵ Chapman, 75.

¹²⁶ Chapman, 75; Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 48.

¹²⁷ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 49.

¹²⁸ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 338.

¹²⁹ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 50.

Chapman believes that the Algeria Accord nearly destroyed the ability of the Peshmerga to fight and the cause of the Kurdish nation in Iraq became weaker than ever, as the arena was left empty for Baathists to strengthen their grip on Iran and marginalize Kurds. The defeat of 1975 had a tremendous impact on the Kurdish national cause and the Peshmerga of Kurdistan, which made the Kurds call the events of 1975 as *nisko*, or the “catastrophe.”¹³⁰ The Kurdish cause further deteriorated after the migration of Mulla Mustafa Barzani to Iran and then to the United States to receive lung cancer treatments in Washington, D.C, a disease that he died of in March 1979.¹³¹ Barzani left an organized military behind that later helped Kurdish nationalist movements to carry on his legacy. The military organization that was inherited from different revolts and trainings received in places like Mahabad Republic and the Soviet Union remained in the Peshmerga forces, which made them fight in the next chapters of war against the Iraqi regime.

After the 1975 accord and the power vacuum left by the illness of Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the KDP established a Provisional Command (KDPPC) in late 1975, but they did not become operational until 1976. Operations of the Peshmerga took the shape of small-scale attacks as decided in the third conference of the KDPPC, which recommended resorting to “partisan operations.”¹³² At the same time, from 1976 onward the Iraqi government took some measures against the reemergence of the Peshmerga and the Kurdish nationalism movement through blocking the illicit border roads and conducting mass relocation of the Kurdish population as the Iraqi government moved Kurds from their land into areas under Iraqi control. The main goal behind this mass movement was stopping the support of the Kurdish population to the Peshmerga.¹³³ Thus, these operations did not help in promoting the cause and capabilities of the Peshmerga until the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–1988.

¹³⁰ Chapman, “Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government,” 78; Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 51.

¹³¹ Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, 181.

¹³² Ghareeb, 182.

¹³³ O’Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle, 1920–94*, 102–3.

After the death of Mulla Mustafa Barzani in 1979, two new figures dominated the power in Iraq and Iran. The two figures were Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. The two new figures started a war in 1980.¹³⁴ During the war, Peshmerga forces found a chance to move freely in their mountainous areas of the Kurdistan Region and they were able to inflict losses on the Iraqi army. During this era, the Peshmerga forces conducted small unit “hit and run” attacks, but not always. Other times the Peshmerga fighters conducted conventional attacks like the case of 1985 when a unit of 50 Peshmerga men attacked a unit of 400 Iraqi men. After destroying the unit, they took some Iraqi prisoners.¹³⁵ The Peshmerga conducted many attacks against the Iraqi army and seized weapons and supplies that later were used for Peshmerga operations.¹³⁶ Major success occurred when Peshmerga forces increased their coordination, and political parties established the Kurdistan National Front (KNF) in 1987.

The establishment of the KNF helped the Peshmerga to operate more effectively and they managed to retake control of many towns in Kurdistan. This momentum of the Peshmerga made Saddam Hussein retaliate not only against the Kurdish Peshmerga, but also against the Kurdish population. Ali Hassan Al Majid, the cousin of Saddam Hussein and a general in the Iraqi army, led the mass killing of Kurdish civilians. In 1988 despite the international support to Iraq, Saddam Hussein made his biggest mistake by attacking the Kurds in Halabja with chemical mustard and cyanide weapons as he thought that this might stop the supply line to the Peshmerga.¹³⁷ This made the international community more sympathetic to the Kurds and pay more attention to the Kurdish cause.¹³⁸ Despite the ceasefire agreement of August 20, 1988, Saddam Hussein kept attacking the Kurds with chemical weapons. Then he used his air force and armored units to retake control of most of the areas controlled by the Peshmerga. Thus, his army forced the Kurdish population to flee to Iran alongside the Peshmerga fighters. Hence, Saddam Hussein was able to

¹³⁴ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 54.

¹³⁵ Chapman, “Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government,” 91–92.

¹³⁶ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 55.

¹³⁷ Lortz, 56–57.

¹³⁸ O’Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle, 1920–94*, 175.

eliminate the effectiveness of the Peshmerga forces again.¹³⁹ During 1989–1990, the number of Peshmerga fighters was small, but they represented the main source of hope for Kurdish autonomy as the Kurdish politicians were marginalized. With limited arms, the Peshmerga forces reemerged and conducted small-scale attacks against the Iraqi army and controlled some areas in Kurdistan.¹⁴⁰

4. Unification and Institutionalization (1991–2017)

After the invasion of Kuwait, the U.S.-led coalition started the Desert Storm Operation against Iraq. During this time Saddam Hussein asked the Kurdish leadership to accept a five-year ceasefire.¹⁴¹ His request was denied by the Kurdish leadership. The Peshmerga continued their attacks against Iraq and expanded their links with the Kurdish members of the Iraqi army, which helped them to defect from the Iraqi army. The number of the Kurdish members of the Iraqi army was estimated to be more than 200,000 fighters.¹⁴² The defection of this number of trained soldiers helped in improving the Peshmerga's effectiveness and helped them to access more intelligence information.¹⁴³ Furthermore, after the defeat of the Iraqi army and suffering thousands of casualties, many Iraqi armed members deserted their ranks, and the morale of the Iraqi soldiers became very low; thousands of already frustrated Iraqi Shiites rose up in the southern cities of Iraq just after the ceasefire of February 28, 1991. They managed to control ten major cities of Iraq.¹⁴⁴

The uprising of the South sparked the willingness of the defected Kurdish army members to overthrow the government of Iraq in the northern prong as well, and thousands of these defected troops joined the Peshmerga.¹⁴⁵ These troops started to seize control of

¹³⁹ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 57.

¹⁴⁰ Lortz, 58.

¹⁴¹ Lortz, 58.

¹⁴² O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle, 1920–94*, 185.

¹⁴³ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 58.

¹⁴⁴ Lortz, 59.

¹⁴⁵ Lortz, 59.

the many cities of Kurdistan with the help of the population and without a pre-coordination with the Kurdish leadership. This move initially surprised the leadership but later boosted the momentum of the uprising with the arrival of the Peshmerga in the cities and the liberation of major cities, including Kirkuk.¹⁴⁶ The KNF centralized the efforts for the liberation of Kurdistan and destabilized the Iraqi army through issuing an amnesty for all who collaborated with the Iraqi government.¹⁴⁷

After retreating from Kuwait, and suppressing the southern uprising, the Iraqi regime used fixed-wings and helicopters alongside the army arsenal, and started suppressing the Kurds.¹⁴⁸ Overwhelmed by the Iraqi power, most of the forces retreated and some Peshmerga kept defending until they opened the way for the Kurdish population to flee. Thus, more than 450,000 Kurds fled to Turkey and 1,500,000 fled to Iran.¹⁴⁹ The Peshmerga were facing the Iraqi army, but their air supremacy gave the Iraqi advancing forces the privilege of taking control of Kurdistan. The human atrocities caused the United Nations to issue Resolution Number 688, which helped countries to provide support to the Kurdish people and imposed a no-fly zone on Kurdistan.¹⁵⁰ Also, this move helped the Peshmerga to regain their position as they were tasked to open the path for returning the population to their cities. Meanwhile, the deployment of the U.S. special forces helped the Peshmerga to reestablish their relationship militarily with the United States, a relation that helped in facilitating future operations in Iraq.¹⁵¹ After the liberation of what is now officially known as the Kurdistan Region, Kurdish people maintained their status quo and the people of Kurdistan supported the Peshmerga forces in defending their land.

¹⁴⁶ O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle, 1920–94*, 185–86.

¹⁴⁷ Fālih 'Abd al-Jabbār and Hosham Dawod, *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics* (London: Saqi, 2006), 161.

¹⁴⁸ Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds of Iraq: Tragedy and Hope* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 52.

¹⁴⁹ Gunter, 85.

¹⁵⁰ Gunter, 85.

¹⁵¹ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 61.

After the 1991 return, the conflicts between the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Iraqi army continued until July 1991; as a result, the Peshmerga controlled Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok. Therefore, Saddam Hussein imposed a blockade on Kurdistan in October 1991.¹⁵² Despite the blockade, the Peshmerga forces benefited from the 1991 uprising in many ways.¹⁵³ First, militarily the Peshmerga forces were able to establish their own training camp, operate freely in their own land, develop large units, and expand and organize these units. Second, economically, as the blockade continued, employment was difficult; therefore, many people joined the Peshmerga force. This guaranteed these new recruited people a financial source and at the same time helped in adding to the number of the Peshmerga.¹⁵⁴ The uprising helped the Peshmerga to modernize, avoid guerilla warfare, and tend to large regular military formations. Also, the Peshmerga were able to obtain a stable source of salary, as they previously were not receiving a stable salary to such an extent that they were called by some scholars as “true volunteers.”¹⁵⁵

Another change that emerged after the uprising of the 1991 was in the bureaucracy of the Peshmerga. In 1992 when the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs was established, changes to the command structure took place. Additionally, modern organization of the units and the adoption of military ranks and insignia enabled the Peshmerga to progress and become a modern military in the late 1990s.¹⁵⁶

Some of international entities, especially until 2003, kept referring to the Peshmerga as a political party militia, which means that there is no legal law that these forces could abide by. This identification could have been considered true before the uprising of 1991 and the establishment of the ministry of Peshmerga in 1992.¹⁵⁷ In 1992, however, the Peshmerga became institutionalized within the structure of the government.

¹⁵² Lortz, 62.

¹⁵³ Lortz, 61.

¹⁵⁴ Chapman, “Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government,” 95.

¹⁵⁵ Chapman, 94–96.

¹⁵⁶ Chapman, 97.

¹⁵⁷ Chapman, 98.

Furthermore, after maintaining control of the Kurdistan Region, the Kurdish political parties agreed to establish the Kurdish National Assembly in 1992. Hence, the Assembly legitimized the Peshmerga forces as a legal security service in Kurdistan by law Number 2 of 1992. Additionally, the leaders of Peshmerga were promoted through decrees issued by the commander in chief of the Peshmerga forces; thus, these forces were legally responsible to the legal body of the government.¹⁵⁸

Between 1995 and 1998 a civil war erupted in Kurdistan and made Peshmerga forces face each other militarily and left hundreds of casualties behind. The civil war continued until 1998, when the Washington Agreement was signed for ending the civil war.¹⁵⁹ Although this agreement managed to end the war, the aftermath of the civil war divided Kurdistan and the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs into two parts, which helped in clamping down the turmoil of the civil war and later helped reunify Peshmerga Ministries.¹⁶⁰ The civil war of the Kurdistan Region was one of the major mistakes in the history of Kurdistan, especially for Kurdish unity. The civil war taught Kurdish leadership not to use the Peshmerga in internal conflicts because of the devastating impact of involving Peshmerga in these conflicts.

a. *The Role of the Peshmerga during Operation Iraqi Freedom until the War against ISIS*

In 2003, when the United States-led coalition started Operation Iraqi Freedom, they initially started from the south of Iraq. They planned to open a prong in the north as well. Their plan almost came to naught as the Turkish government refused to let the U.S. forces use its soil for this operation. Still, the Americans wanted to open a northern flank in order to prevent the Iraqi 13th Division from reinforcing the southern flank.¹⁶¹ Thus, another

¹⁵⁸ Chapman, 98–99.

¹⁵⁹ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 61–65.

¹⁶⁰ ‘Abd al-Jabbār and Dawod, *The Kurds*, 173.

¹⁶¹ Isaac J. Peltier, *Surrogate Warfare: The Role of U.S. Army Special Forces* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Army Command and General Staff College, 2005), 24, <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA436109>.

option was considered, and the Kurdistan Region was the feasible option. The United States Task Force Viking were deployed to the Kurdistan Region.¹⁶²

The first operation that was conducted by Viking was Operation Viking Hammer.¹⁶³ During this operation, the Task Force helped the Peshmerga to eliminate the threat of a terrorist group named Ansar Al Islam, which was providing shelter to al-Qaeda terrorists.

The second operation that was conducted by Vikings with the support of about 70,000 Peshmerga fighters was Operation Green Line in 2003.¹⁶⁴ The United States Task Force oversaw the planning of retaking the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul back from the Baathist regime by the Peshmerga forces.¹⁶⁵ The task force asked the Peshmerga to retreat after liberating Kirkuk and Mosul. When the advancing forces of the Peshmerga controlled Mosul, they vacated the city as planned, but the Peshmerga unit that was assigned to retake Kirkuk did not vacate the city of Kirkuk and stayed there against the will of the U.S. task force.¹⁶⁶ Thus, the Peshmerga forces proved that they did not want to expand into areas that were not claimed as Kurdistan and that they preferred to provide security in areas that the Kurds claimed as Kurdistan. Staying in Kirkuk against the will of the task force was an extension of the Kurdish belief that Kirkuk is a Kurdish city.¹⁶⁷

After the occupation of Baghdad on April 9, 2003, a major success for the offensive forces was achieved, as the forces prevented the 13th division of the Iraqi army to reinforce the southern prong, then defeated it in the northern prong.¹⁶⁸ The Peshmerga forces were finally able to defeat the Iraqi Army with the assistance of the United States and topple the

¹⁶² Peltier, 2.

¹⁶³ Peltier, 29.

¹⁶⁴ Richard D. Newton, *Contemporary Security Challenges: Irregular Warfare and Indirect Approaches*, JSOU Report 09 (Hurlburt Field, FL: The JSOU Press, 2009), 2.

¹⁶⁵ Peltier, *Surrogate Warfare*, 73–75.

¹⁶⁶ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 67.

¹⁶⁷ The Kurdish revolutionary movement always demanded having Kirkuk as a part of Kurdistan, especially in the manifesto of 1970. See Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, 63.

¹⁶⁸ Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 340.

oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein. The end of Saddam Hussein ended a long era of oppression and tyranny, but the next chapter of the Peshmerga and involving the Iraqi army would be challenging as well.

Since the 2003 liberation of Iraq, the Peshmerga forces were politically recognized and obtained a special legal position. This improvement came from the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) with issuing orders that recognized the Peshmerga. The CPA exempted the Peshmerga from disbandment via the “exception” section 3 of CPA Order Number 91, Regulation of Armed Forces and Militias Within Iraq.¹⁶⁹

In August 2003, a fraction of the Peshmerga forces was assigned to become the border guards, another was assigned to become the guards of the vital oil pipelines, and others continued to receive training from the coalition forces.¹⁷⁰ The relationship between the Peshmerga and the U.S. forces reached an extent that the Peshmerga were operating with the United States in interrogating, providing security, and patrolling neighborhoods. Thus, the role of the Peshmerga in building the new Iraqi Army was signified by the Peshmerga forces making up 30% of the Iraqi Army.¹⁷¹

After disbanding the Iraqi Army by the CPA, there was a force that was built from the Peshmerga and trained by the coalition forces to fill in. This force was known as the Iraqi Civil Defense Force (ICDF). This force helped in increasing the number of military personnel in Iraq as the coalition forces were unable to provide enough personnel for protecting the whole country. The number of the force was 41,000 troops, which were provided by the Peshmerga.¹⁷²

According to Lortz, in 2006, the Executive Conference on Regional Security responsibilities for designation of the Peshmerga duties was held in Erbil. The KRG, the Iraqi Government, and representatives of the Multinational Forces Iraq (MNF-I)

¹⁶⁹ Chapman, “Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government,” 99.

¹⁷⁰ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 69.

¹⁷¹ Lortz, 70.

¹⁷² Timothy C. Davis, *Building the Iraqi Army: Teaching a Nation to Fish* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Command and Staff Collage, 2005), 21, <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA505888>.

participated in the conference. Based on legislation and the Iraqi constitution, the duties and the missions of the Peshmerga included,¹⁷³

defending and securing the Kurdistan Region and sovereignty, its government, [nationality] and territory, defending the security and the sovereignty of Federal Iraq ... supporting MoD and MoI [in] stopping devastation of Iraq and eradication of terrorism ... preserving democracy and constitutional institutions in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. Also, other duties on request of the Federal Government.¹⁷⁴

This situation remained stable and helped the Peshmerga reorganize and train its troops in military academies in Zakho-Duhok Province and Qalachulan-Sulaymaniyah Province. The exception to this stable and tranquil situation was in 2010 when the Iraqi security forces established the Tigris Operations Command that had its headquarters in Kirkuk and included all Kurdistan Region territory under its command and areas for its operations. This caused tensions between the Iraqi government and the KRG.

b. The Role of the Peshmerga in Defeating ISIS

In 2014, before ISIS control of Mosul, the KRG offered its help to send the much more powerful Peshmerga and its readiness to support the Iraqi forces in defending Mosul. This offer of the Kurdistan Region was rejected by the Iraqi government, as some Iraqi Army commanders confessed when they detailed the fall of Mosul.¹⁷⁵

Despite lack of arms and advanced weapons, the Peshmerga forces were the first force to defeat ISIS and stop its expansion.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, the Peshmerga were also the force that earned the respect and trust of the coalition forces and that were in demand; the Kurdish Peshmerga fought against ISIS in areas outside the region of Kurdistan, such as the deployment of the Peshmerga to Kobane-Syria to help their fellow Kurds in defeating

¹⁷³ Chapman, "Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government," 137–38.

¹⁷⁴ Chapman, 137–38.

¹⁷⁵ Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco, 2016), 48.

¹⁷⁶ Yonah Alexander, *The Islamic State: Combating the Caliphate without Borders* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 241.

ISIS there as well.¹⁷⁷ Despite having fewer fighters (150,000–200,000), the Peshmerga forces were able to defeat ISIS.¹⁷⁸

C. CONCLUSION

In 1891, the Kurdish forces, known then as the Hamidiyah Cavalry, were divided into small tribal groups that were under the sovereignty of the Ottoman sultan. By 2003, these groups were united into a powerful and integrated force recognized by state law. How did this dramatic transformation occur?

The rise of the Peshmerga was caused by important leaders who fostered nationalism. These individuals sought a rational target which was pursuing their national cause of achieving the Kurdish longstanding dream of having their own state. Such leaders included Sheikh Mahmoud Barznji in Sulaymaniyah-Iraq; Sheikh Saeed in Palu-Turkey; and Mulla Mustafa Barzani in Erbil-Iraq. After the emergence of these leaders, the commonality among these revolutions was no longer about tribes or survival but about the autonomy or the independence of Kurdistan as the leaders had their national goal as their own priority.¹⁷⁹ The era that helped the Peshmerga to develop through receiving various trainings and experiencing different revolts was when they were led by Mulla Mustafa Barzani. During this period the role of the Peshmerga increased, especially in terms of facing the armies of other nations that wanted to impose their suzerainty over the areas inhabited by the Kurds. Hence, the role of the Peshmerga became essential in defining Kurdish identity and it has remained so. The emergence of the Peshmerga was essential for identifying the Kurdish identity. Additionally, the Peshmerga took advantage of their institutional status since 1992 and claimed the first victory among all the regional forces that were fighting against ISIS. Despite that the Peshmerga lost their unity and became fragmented in some stages, these stages helped the Peshmerga forces to become what they are now: an effective force that defeated the ISIS.

¹⁷⁷ Alexander, 242.

¹⁷⁸ Sumit Ganguly and Feisal Al - Istrabadi, *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 104, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt1zctt19>.

¹⁷⁹ Lortz, *Willing to Face Death*, 1.

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III. ISIS: ITS HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

According to Richard Engel in the foreword to Malcolm W. Nance's book *Defeating ISIS*, "ISIS is a cult that wants to transform Islam at gunpoint, and to defeat it the world must understand the group on its own terms."¹⁸⁰ Understanding the nature of ISIS is important for analyzing its actions. It is important to understand the stages through which ISIS progressed in order to emerge, as it later became a threat to Kurdistan and the Peshmerga forces. Its founding leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was a pragmatic decision maker; whether he truly believed in his fundamentalist ideology or not, he was not bound by it in his strategic decisions. By contrast, his eventual successor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was bound by this ideology when he formulated and executed his strategy. In this chapter, the author discusses and analyzes the history and the development of ISIS, the ideology of ISIS, and how this ideology led to the group's decision to attack the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

A. THE EVOLUTION OF ISIS

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi founded the precursor to ISIS, al-Qaeda in Iraq or AQI. His successor, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, merged AQI with the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which later evolved into ISIS under the now deceased leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The leadership transition to al-Baghdadi made ideology an important driver of strategy for ISIS. Instead of pursuing a practical course based on pragmatic considerations, Baghdadi made ideological decisions in pursuit of establishing an Islamic caliphate. This decision set the stage for the war between ISIS and several rival camps, including the Kurdish Peshmerga.

The roots of the ISIS lie with a Jordanian, not an Iraqi or a Syrian. Ahmad Fadhil Nazzal al Kalaylah, later known as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was born in a West Bank city in October 1966 to a large family.¹⁸¹ His family was from an Arab tribe named the Bani

¹⁸⁰ Malcolm W. Nance, *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016).

¹⁸¹ Mary Anne Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi," *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2006, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/>.

Hassan, who are known for their loyalty to Jordan's monarchy.¹⁸² According to Jason Burke, in his early youth, al-Zarqawi started to get into petty crime, which included engaging in sexual assaults and other violence.¹⁸³ In their interview with the *New York Times*, al-Zarqawi's own cousins described him as a heavy drinker and tattooed.¹⁸⁴ When he found religion, however, he quickly radicalized. Al-Zarqawi discovered Salafism, which is a doctrine that encourages and advocates the early life of Islam. Salafism also encourages the Muslim to follow the practices of Prophet Muhammed.¹⁸⁵

During the time that he was attending the mosque of al-Husayn Ben Ali, al-Zarqawi changed his behavior in a manner that even surprised his community. Al-Zarqawi became more devoted to his religion and became a model of the young pious Muslim who was engaging actively with imams and debating with them about the theocracies of Jihad. He also paid more attention to the sectarian wars in places that Sunni Jihadi groups were fighting, especially in Afghanistan.¹⁸⁶ Al-Zarqawi was radicalized during his time in jail in the late 1980s, but he was further inspired by jihadist ideology when he met with the Afghan jihadist, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, as he was visiting Jordan in order to receive funds and recruit jihadists.¹⁸⁷

Although al-Zarqawi went to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviets, he was more radicalized by his subsequent prison sentence in Jordan.¹⁸⁸ Three months after, he went to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviets in 1989, but by then the war was over.¹⁸⁹ After the withdrawal of the Soviets, he returned to Jordan in 1993 and planned some attacks, but his

¹⁸² Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), 2.

¹⁸³ Jason Burke, *The New Threat: The Past, Present, and Future of Islamic Militancy* (New York: The New Press, 2015), 61.

¹⁸⁴ Weiss, *ISIS*, 2.

¹⁸⁵ Weiss, 2.

¹⁸⁶ Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the Islamic State*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2016), 50–51.

¹⁸⁷ Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 4–5.

¹⁸⁸ Fishman, 5.

¹⁸⁹ William F. McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 9.

attacks were foiled by the Jordanian security force. In 1999 he was released in a general amnesty and fled Jordan for Afghanistan. After the 2001 war on Afghanistan, in 2002 al-Zarqawi fled to a mountainous area between the Kurdistan region of Iraq and Iran, and a terrorist group named Ansar al-Islam provided him with shelter.¹⁹⁰ Ansar al-Islam, after it was formally established in 2003, pledged allegiance to the leader of al-Qaeda, Usama Bin Laden.¹⁹¹ Also, this group helped al-Zarqawi through supplying the ISI with manpower when he split from Ansar al-Islam.¹⁹² After the establishment of ISIS, in August 2014, Ansar al-Islam pledged their allegiance to the Islamic state and supported ISIS with 3,000 fighters.¹⁹³

In 2003, when the Iraqi Freedom Operation started, the U.S-led coalition eliminated the threat that Ansar al-Islam posed to Kurdistan Region and the security of the U.S-led coalition forces. The U.S. Task Force Viking, with the help of the Kurdish forces, demolished this group's presence in the mountains of Kurdistan. According to the details revealed, the operation was named Operation Viking Hammer. During this operation, the Task Force helped the Peshmerga. Ansar al-Islam provided shelter for al-Qaeda terrorists. Tomahawk missiles, B-52 airplanes, and other assets were used in destroying this terrorist group.¹⁹⁴

Despite having been directly attacked by the Kurds, al-Zarqawi did not focus attacks on the Kurds because it was not practical, as it did not serve his goal of provoking the sectarian civil war between the Sunnis and Shiites.¹⁹⁵ Instead, he started conducting

¹⁹⁰ Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 17.

¹⁹¹ Lutfi Salman, "Qiaraa fi bayan Tanzim 'Ansar al-Islam al-i'" [A reading of the Ansar al-Islam terrorist group... how the group relied on the experience of al-Qaeda], November 4, 2017, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/2679054>.

¹⁹² MEMRI, "'The Sheikh of the Slaughterers.'" 'The Sheikh of the Slaughterers': Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi and the Al-Qaeda Connection," MEMRI, [https://www.memri.org/reports/%E2%80%98sheikh-slaughterers%E2%80%99-abu-musab-al-zarqawi-and-al-qaeda-connection.rhbi.. esta'ana bikhbrat al-Qaeda](https://www.memri.org/reports/%E2%80%98sheikh-slaughterers%E2%80%99-abu-musab-al-zarqawi-and-al-qaeda-connection.rhbi..%E2%80%99-esta%27ana-bikhbrat-al-qaeda)," El Watan News, November 4, 2017.

¹⁹³ Salman, "Qiaraa fi bayan."

¹⁹⁴ Newton, *Contemporary Security Challenges*, 73; Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 25–29.

¹⁹⁵ Mohammed M. Hafez, "The Origins of Sectarian Terrorism in Iraq," in *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat: From 9/11 to Osama Bin Laden's Death*, ed. Bruce Hoffman and Fernando Reinares (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 444–46.

violent attacks in southern Iraq, especially attacks that targeted the headquarter buildings of both the United Nations and the Red Cross in Baghdad.¹⁹⁶ Al-Zarqawi founded Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTJ) in 2003, a group that he and his militants planned for since their time in Herat Camp in 2000.¹⁹⁷ Although the group, and especially al-Zarqawi, initially refused to pledge their allegiance to al-Qaeda and its leader Usama Bin Laden, they eventually pledged their allegiance to Bin Laden and merged with al-Qaeda.¹⁹⁸ Brian Fishman writes that later, al-Zarqawi named their group *Tanzim Al-Qaeda fi Bilad Al-Rafidayn*, or what was commonly known by scholars as al-Qaeda in Iraq.

During this time, al-Zarqawi directed only one major attack on the Kurds. On February 1, 2004, some of the key leaders of the KDP, and the PUK, were receiving the people of Erbil for the celebrations of the sacrifice feast. Two suicide attacks in the headquarters of the Kurdish political parties caused the death and injury of several prominent leaders.¹⁹⁹ This attack, however, was an exception, despite al-Zarqawi's ideological opposition to the Kurds and their nationalism. He describes the Kurds in a 2004 letter: "These are a lump [in the throat] and a thorn whose time to be clipped has yet to come. They are last on the list, even though we are making efforts to harm some of their symbolic figures, God willing."²⁰⁰

In 2006, after an extensive reconnaissance and a combined effort, al-Zarqawi was located in an area named Hibhib, west of Baqubah and north of Baghdad. Soon after he was targeted by an airstrike of the United States Air Force, and killed.²⁰¹ Before his death, al-Zarqawi established his form of al-Qaeda, which was rebranded as the *Mujahdin Shura*

¹⁹⁶ Warrick, *Black Flags*, 119.

¹⁹⁷ Weiss, *ISIS*, 13.

¹⁹⁸ Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 36, 59.

¹⁹⁹ Michael Rubin, "Ansar Al-Sunna: Iraq's New Terrorist Threat," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 6, no. 5 (May 2004), https://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0405_iraq1.htm.

²⁰⁰ Professor Craig Whiteside, email message to author, November 15, 2019: Zarqawi Letter, February 2004 Coalition Provisional Authority, English translation of terrorist Musab al-Zarqawi letter obtained by United States Government in Iraq.

²⁰¹ Warrick, *Black Flags*, 213–18.

Council, which later would become the ISI.²⁰² He became the predecessor of Abu Hamza al-Muhajir and Abu Omer al-Baghdadi, who were both killed in 2010.²⁰³

The death of al-Zarqawi meant that ISIS had to scale back its activities and return to a more basic phase of operations. In his article “New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare,” Craig Whiteside explains how ISIS went through three different phases as it evolved using the Maoist principles of revolutionaries, in addition to the experience of other terrorist Salafi jihadist groups.²⁰⁴ Phase I was the phase of “building.” This phase was allocated for building clandestine networks and recruiting fighters. Additionally, it was allocated for spreading the ideology of ISIS and capitalizing on the chaotic situation in Iraq after the American and allied invasion. Phase II was “expansion” or the growth of the small clandestine network. Because of establishing the Awakening forces for Sunni tribes by coalition forces, ISIS lost the support of local Sunni tribes; thus, ISIS reverted to Phase I. Nevertheless, it would soon escalate its activities again. ISIS managed to evolve again by capitalizing on the “political dysfunction” and taking advantage of the already blazed sectarian struggle in Iraq. Hence, ISIS again survived and advanced once more to Phase II. Soon after, ISIS capitalized on the achievements of Phase II and expanded more in terms of securing supplies and recruiting fighters. Hence, Phase III started, which included securing human and financial resources, recruiting more fighters to include foreign fighters, starting “decisive campaigns,” and establishing and shaping the sentiment of the political environment in a way that could serve the ultimate goal of establishing its Caliphate.²⁰⁵ Table 1 shows the development phases of ISIS.

²⁰² Alexander, *The Islamic State*, 1.

²⁰³ Robert G. Rabil, “The ISIS Chronicles: A History,” *National Interest*, July 17, 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-isis-chronicles-history-10895>.

²⁰⁴ Craig Whiteside, “New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016),” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 4 (2016): 6, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/523>.

²⁰⁵ Whiteside, 9.

Table 1. The Phases of ISIS's Development.²⁰⁶

	Ph 1 - Building	Ph 2 - Expansion	Ph 1 -- Preserving	Ph 2 - Expansion2	Ph 3 - Decisive
Years:	2002-2005	2005-2007	2008-2011	2011-2013	2013-2016
Leadership	Abu Musab Zarqawi	Zarqawi/Abu Omar	Omar/Hamza	Abu Bakr	Abu Bakr

1. The Rise of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

After the death of the two successors of al-Zarqawi, a new terrorist leader rose to power, whose name was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Al-Baghdadi, or Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri, was born in 1971 to an Arab Sunni family in Samarra, north of Baghdad.²⁰⁷ He was born into a family from the tribe believed to have descended from Prophet Muhammed. His family were pious and Salafi,²⁰⁸ which influenced him to be a strong Salafi known among his neighbors as “the believer.”²⁰⁹ Al-Baghdadi completed the bachelor's degree in Islamic religion in the recitation of the Quran. Later, in 1999, al-Baghdadi started his doctorate program and in 2000, Baghdadi embraced Salafi Jihadism and joined an ultraconservative Islamic group, but he was rejected by his peers. According to authors Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, Baghdadi lacked the charisma of a leader, and had a limited objective of becoming an employee of the Ministry of Islamic Endowment.²¹⁰ According to the author, Baghdadi's mentor during his doctorate program was a close friend of Izzat al-Douri, who later started operating in the Islamic State's capital al-Raqqa.

During one of the raids by the U.S. Army in Fallujah in February 2004, al-Baghdadi was arrested and taken to the Bucca prison like thousands of other jihadists.²¹¹ That prison was the location that gathered many of the future leaders of ISIS. Important terrorists such as Manaf al-Rawi and Umar, the son of Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi, the role model for al-

²⁰⁶ Source: Whiteside, 9.

²⁰⁷ Weiss, *ISIS*, 117.

²⁰⁸ Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 33.

²⁰⁹ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 74, 75.

²¹⁰ Weiss, *ISIS*, 117, 121.

²¹¹ Weiss, 118–19.

Zarqawi, were also in Bucca. According to Fishman, the son of Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi enthusiastically told his father that, “Iraqi prisons have become the best university for education, as teachers from the entire world are assembling in this prison.”²¹² Fishman believes that, indeed, prison was a networking system for jihadists and a hub for connecting them. Al-Baghdadi started mediating feuds and socializing with other inmates from different social and political backgrounds.²¹³

During his imprisonment in Bucca, al-Baghdadi met some Baath officers, from whom he learned Baathist military tactics, and Baghdadi was able to radicalize and indoctrinate Baathist officers with the radicalism of Salafi jihad. After Baghdadi was released from jail, he immediately joined the ISI when the leader of the group Abu Omer al-Baghdadi accepted him. After Abu Omer’s death in April 2010,²¹⁴ ISI selected Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to become the leader for four reasons: first, because of his education in Islamic law;²¹⁵ second, his Baghdadi lineage as he was from the al-Quraysh tribe, which is believed to be from Prophet Muhammed’s lineage; third, at the time that his predecessor, Abu Omer was killed, al-Baghdadi was a member of al-Shura Council of ISI, and he was close to his predecessor; fourth, his age, as he was considered one of the young leaders of ISI who could lead the organization for a long duration, even after the U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq.²¹⁶

In May 2010, al-Baghdadi started leading ISI. He started rebuilding and reorganizing the terrorist group and removed potential rivals and replaced them with close allies, many of whom he knew from Bucca prison. Thus, Baghdadi managed to reorganize ISI in a way that secured his position and safety.²¹⁷ In the early days of Baghdadi’s leadership, many of the Baathist leaders who were in Bucca prison took leadership

²¹² Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 150.

²¹³ Fishman, 150.

²¹⁴ Warrick, *Black Flags*, 37.

²¹⁵ Warrick, 37.

²¹⁶ Weiss, *ISIS*, 120.

²¹⁷ Warrick, *Black Flags*, 37–38.

positions. Baathists played an important role and they dominated the group as they brought military knowledge and military bureaucracy into the ISI, something that terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISI lacked. The best-known Baathist officer who took a key position in ISI was Abu Muslim al-Turkmani as he was the second in command after Baghdadi. Al-Turkmani was killed in late 2014.²¹⁸ While the Baathists were included for their technical knowledge, the strategic direction came from al-Baghdadi and his ideology. According to Derek Harvey, as quoted by Weiss, “he’s clearly not Zarqawi. But the breadth and size of the organization and the things it has going on from financial enterprises to administration to the running of eight separate regional commands, to its tactical partnering with Naqshbandi Army, to its tribal outreach—I see a Baathist style to all of this.”²¹⁹

In 2010 and 2011, the ISI commanded by al-Baghdadi increased its attacks and escalated tensions, but in 2012, with the policies of the Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki, the tensions were more fueled, and the sectarianism was far worse. In the same year, Baghdadi started sending ISI operatives to Syria and he tasked Abu Muhammed al-Jawlani to build a new jihadist organization in Syria.²²⁰ Al-Jawlani was a Syrian-born ISI leader who spent time in Bucca and was the ISI regional leader of Mosul. After his arrival in Syria, he established the rebel group of Jabhat al-Nusra. Six months after its establishment, Jabhat al-Nusrah participated in some of the most brutal attacks and expanded in Syria. Meanwhile, Baghdadi was busy expanding the ISI in Iraq. According to Joby Warrick, “if the sectarian clashes in Iraq provided an opening to ISI to regroup, the violence in Syria gave Baghdadi a pretext to expand.”²²¹

In April 2013, after the expansion of al-Nusra, Baghdadi announced the integration of al-Nusrah and ISIS without the consent of the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the leader of Jabhat al-Nusrah, al-Jawlani.²²² The announcement created serious

²¹⁸ Warrick, 38.

²¹⁹ Weiss, *ISIS*, 121.

²²⁰ Warrick, *Black Flags*, 39.

²²¹ Warrick, 40.

²²² Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 176.

tensions between ISIS and al-Nusra, which made al-Zawahiri intervene as he wanted to unify both under the umbrella of al-Qaeda Iraq. Baghdadi disobeyed al-Zawahiri and believed that the Islamic State should expand beyond the artificial borders, especially the Sykes-Picot borders, as a unified Islamic State.²²³ Al-Baghdadi sent forces to Syria and was able to recruit fighters from al-Nusra, starting a war within a war of Syria between the two groups. Therefore, in February 2014, al-Qaeda formally disavowed ISIS.²²⁴ Then, ISIS attacked Syria, managed to seize control of Raqqa and the city of Deir al-Zour from al-Nusra.²²⁵ Thus, ISIS managed to gain momentum and fought against the pro-regime forces and other radical groups. Seizing control over the city of Deir al-Zour helped ISIS to strengthen its logistics and supply line between Syria and Iraq. The advances of ISIS in Syria helped it to push more strongly toward Iraq.²²⁶

2. The Fall of Mosul

According to Bakhtyar Shakhi, the momentum of ISIS and its plans were anticipated based on the intelligence obtained from sources in the Kurdistan Region.²²⁷ Shakhi argues that before the fall of Mosul, particularly in early 2014, the president of Kurdistan Region at that time, President Masoud Barzani, sent warnings to the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, via Ammar al-Hakim, Dr. Rozh Nuri Shawais, and the U.S. ambassador to Iraq. Barzani warned al-Maliki that terrorists had increased their activities in the west side of Mosul and were planning to control the city. Although these warnings were delivered to al-Maliki, he did not respond. After the reaction of Maliki, President Barzani decided to call al-Maliki and warn him personally. After Barzani's second warning, al-Maliki replied, "Mosul is protected, you'd better take care of Kurdistan."²²⁸

²²³ Dina Esfandiary, "ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror. By Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan," *International Affairs* 91, no. 5 (2015): 185–86, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12426>.

²²⁴ Esfandiary, 196.

²²⁵ Nance, *Defeating ISIS*, 58–59.

²²⁶ Warrick, *Black Flags*, 44.

²²⁷ Bakhtyar Shakhi, *Kurdistan, Heading towards Eternity* (Erbil, Iraq: Kurdistan Director General of Public Library, 2019), 32.

²²⁸ Shakhi, 32.

According to Shakhi, based on the response of al-Maliki and the confessions of the army generals who were appointed and commissioned by al-Maliki to protect Mosul, it can be understood that, not only did al-Maliki reject the Peshmerga's support, but he also ordered his defeated general to leave the city without resistance.²²⁹ Shakhi argues that with the advances of ISIS in other areas of Iraq, on June 7, 2014, President Barzani again warned al-Maliki via the Americans that Mosul was in danger and the Kurdistan Region was ready to send Peshmerga forces to defend the city alongside the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF); again al-Maliki rejected the offer. Shakhi further states that after the fall of Mosul, on July 10, 2014, the special presidential envoy for countering ISIS told Barzani, "I was aware that you showed readiness to send Peshmerga and protect Mosul three days ahead of the Mosul events; we told this to al-Maliki but he did not accept it."²³⁰

Later investigation revealed that al-Maliki had ordered his generals to retreat from Mosul without a fight. Later, after the fall of the city, a commission was established by the Iraqi Parliament for investigating the reasons behind Mosul's fall. According to Shakhi, on June 16, 2015, a member of the investigator's commission revealed to the media that Gen. Ali Ghedan, the commander of the Iraqi ground forces, had confessed during the first investigation session that he had received direct and clear orders from al-Maliki to retreat from the city and the province without fighting; al-Maliki had told him that they needed to drop their weapons and leave without resistance.²³¹ Shakhi argues that later intelligence revealed that ISIS had no intentions to occupy Mosul; they wanted to break into Badush prison and set the terrorists and Baathists free. Shakhi explains that the terrorists shelled Ghazlan military camp, where the defeated generals had stationed their headquarters, with some mortar rounds. Shakhi argues that the two generals took advantage of the mortar rounds that impacted their headquarters to create a diversion.²³² Thus, they made Iraqi forces drop their weapons and flee the city. Initially, the army generals fled toward Peshmerga forces, then they were followed by at least six army brigades and federal police

²²⁹ Shakhi, 33.

²³⁰ Shakhi, 32–33.

²³¹ Shakhi, 33.

²³² Shakhi, 33.

forces. All these forces abandoned their weapons in Mosul. The two main generals who acted based on the orders of al-Maliki were Ali Ghedan and Abood Ghanber. These two generals were granted a wide range of authorities; both were threatening Kurdistan instead of defending the city and Province of Mosul.²³³ This particular point was corroborated by Jessica Stern in her book *ISIS the State of Terror*. Stern cited the *New York Times* interviews of some of the soldiers who served and then fled the city. These soldiers stated that, “the senior commanders fled when they saw ISIS’s infamous black flags moving into the city.”²³⁴ This shows that the commanders were crucial because when command and control is gone, forces are doomed to defeat.

In addition to Barzani’s warning, other officials from Kurdistan Region and foreign countries warned al-Maliki, but he never responded. For example, the Prime Minister of Kurdistan at that time, Nechirvan Barzani, warned al-Maliki about the threat that ISIS posed to Mosul. Again, al-Maliki did not respond.²³⁵ Another warning came from the ex-ambassador of Iran, Hassan Danaeifar.²³⁶

The fall of Mosul marked the largest success of ISIS and the largest defeat of Iraqi forces, as ISIS started conducting attacks on Mosul on June 6, 2014, and after only four days, on June 10, 2014, managed to control the city. This failure of the Iraqi forces represented a large blow to their reputation as an army of 60,000 soldiers;²³⁷ they dropped their weapons and fled from a terrorist group of 13,000 fighters.²³⁸ The forces that were trained by the U.S. forces over the course of eight years, funded and equipped by the United States, simply dropped their weapons and escaped. According to Stern, the U.S. invested

²³³ Shakhi, 33–34; Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2015), 15.

²³⁴ Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 45.

²³⁵ Gil Aegerter, “Kurdistan’s Prime Minister: We Warned U.S. About ISIS in Iraq Months Ago,” NBC News, June 21, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/iraq-turmoil/kurdistan-prime-minister-we-warned-u-s-about-isis-iraq-n137686>.

²³⁶ Shakhi, *Kurdistan, Heading towards Eternity*, 34.

²³⁷ Martin Chulov Fazel Hawramy and Spencer Ackerman, “Iraq Army Capitulates to Isis Militants in Four Cities,” *The Guardian*, June 12, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/11/mosul-isis-gunmen-middle-east-states>.

²³⁸ Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State*, 11.

over \$25 billion in advancing the ISF, but apparently, they were still not ready to fight as the army commanders were the first who fled.²³⁹ Thus, all the investments of the United States were wasted on training a corrupt army dominated by sectarian interests. At the fall of Mosul, only one third of the number of service members were present as the absent service members purchased permanent leaves from their commanders in return for 50% of their salaries.²⁴⁰

The fall of Mosul represents a historical change for Syria, Iraq, and the Middle East, as the terrorist group managed to control areas between the valleys of the Euphrates and the Tigris and the freedom of movement between the east from Iraq to the west into Syria, and vice-versa. ISIS took advantage of this freedom of maneuver in order to control other areas from the two countries, such as Tikrit and Tallafar. Also, the freedom of movement enabled them to surprise enemies as they were able to maneuver between vast and open areas in Iraq and Syria.²⁴¹

After taking control of Mosul, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivered a sermon in the great mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul, where he announced the caliphate of ISIS and himself as a Caliph in July, 2014.²⁴² Soon after, ISIS started attacking the south until they approached Baghdad. Suddenly they changed their focus, and instead attacked the Kurdistan Region from the north in August 2014.²⁴³ Then the terrorist group started controlling areas in Kurdistan, such as Sinjar, known in Kurdish as Shingal, where they massacred Yazidis, and neared the capital of the Kurdistan Region, Erbil. These rapid events and growth of ISIS made the President of the United States at that time, Barack Obama, announce that the United States would take military actions against the terrorist group.²⁴⁴

²³⁹ Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 45.

²⁴⁰ Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State*, 11.

²⁴¹ Cockburn, 12–13.

²⁴² Joe Friesen and Colin Freeze, “Jihad Rising,” *Globe and Mail*, September 6, 2014, 1; Alexander, *The Islamic State*, 13.

²⁴³ Alexander, *The Islamic State*, 14.

²⁴⁴ Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 47–48.

B. IDEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

The ideology of ISIS is based on Salafism. Salafism is the emulation of the actions of the prophet as his righteous descendants. The Islamic State is a Salafi jihadist group that seeks to establish a cross-border transnational Islamic Sunni Salafist Caliphate, which is based on the strict application of the Islamic Sharia interpretation and application in areas that are going to be under their control.²⁴⁵

According to Alexander Yonah, the ideology of the Islamic State is derived from the heritage of the 14th century's inceptions of the Islamic philosopher Ibn Taymiyyah, and it is intertwined with Saudi Wahabism. Wahabism is a puritanical type of Sunni movement named after the extreme radical and exclusionist Wahab ibn Abdul Wahab; based on Wahabism, "the period of the Prophet Muhammed's stay in Medina was the ideal of Muslim society (the 'best of times'), to which all Muslims should aspire to emulate."²⁴⁶ The ideology of the Salafism of ISIS is combined with the ideology of jihadism as the ideology of ISIS focuses on the military conquests that have become the symbol of the early era of Islam. According to the political analyst Shiraz Maher, "ISIS constitutes the most dramatic physical manifestation of Salafi Jihadi doctrine in the modern era, serving dualistic purpose between temporal and cosmic ends."²⁴⁷

According to Weiss and Hassan, al-Zarqawi wanted to spread his ideology through bloodshed and slaughter of enemies. Also, those authors believe that the ideology of ISIS is mainly based on Ibn Taymiyyah's belief in the three pillars, "to worship God, worship only God, and having the right creed."²⁴⁸ This theology was mainly against Sufism and Shia; Ibn Taymiyyah had excluded the Sufis and Shia from Islam as he believed "that their practices and beliefs—including the veneration of imams—compromised their worship of God alone."²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ Alexander, *The Islamic State*, 33.

²⁴⁶ Alexander, 33.

²⁴⁷ Ganguly and Al - Istrabadi, *The Future of ISIS*, 24.

²⁴⁸ Weiss, *ISIS*, 36.

²⁴⁹ Weiss, 36.

The establishment of ISIS was based on a Caliphate that applies strict Sharia law. Yonah showed that, in his work, Naji warns followers of his ideology that “if we are not violent in our jihad and if softness seizes us, that will be a major factor in the loss of the element of strength.”²⁵⁰ Furthermore, Naji urges the jihadists to, “Work to expose the weakness of America’s centralized power by pushing it to abandon the media psychological war and the war by proxy until it fights directly.”²⁵¹

The ideology of ISIS and other sistership terrorist organizations, especially the ideology of extreme Salafi jihadists, depends on three main manifestos, and those who follow the beliefs of these three manifestos are the most extreme radical groups. These three manifestos are collectively known as the Fiqh al-Damaa (the jurisprudence of blood).²⁵² These three manifestos are Abu Bakr Naji’s *Management of Savagery*; the writings of Sayyid Imam Sharif, also known Dr. Fadl, such as the *Introduction to Jurisprudence of Jihad*, and additionally, Abu Musab al-Suri’s manifesto, *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*. All these writings were inspired by the ideology of Ibn Taymiyya.²⁵³ Combining the ideology of the three manifestos by distorting and manipulating the contexts of holy Quran and Sunna would prove to be a dangerous mix for the Salafi jihadist beliefs.

C. DECISION TO ATTACK THE KURDISTAN REGION

In the summer of 2014, ISIS was involved in conflicts on multiple fronts in Syria and Iraq. Yet ISIS attacked the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which only added another barrier to the ISIS’s expansion plan. Under Zarqawi’s leadership, radical Islamists had largely refrained from targeting the Kurds, as it was impractical; under Baghdadi’s leadership, however, ISIS’s ideology was paramount and drove the strategic decision to attack the Kurdistan Region for three reasons. First, it accorded with ISIS’s motto of “enduring and

²⁵⁰ Alexander, *The Islamic State*, 35.

²⁵¹ Scott Atran, “The Real Power of ISIS,” *Daily Beast*, October 25, 2015, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/10/25/the-real-power-of-isis>.

²⁵² Ganguly and Al - Istrabadi, *The Future of ISIS*, 31.

²⁵³ Ganguly and Al - Istrabadi, 31.

expanding.”²⁵⁴ Second, Kurdistan is secular and culturally diverse. Third, Kurdistan’s moves toward independence would have upset ISIS’s goal of becoming the only power in the Middle East.

The primary ideological drive for attacking the Kurdistan Region was ISIS’s intention to expand and fight against four categories of enemies: first, the factions of Islamic entities with international agendas; second, Islamic factions with nationalist agendas; third, nationalist factions with Islamic agendas; fourth, secular factions with Islamic agendas or the states that ISIS views as nominal Islamic countries.²⁵⁵ According to Jawad al-Tamimi, the emphasis on global unity and territorial conquest distinguishes ISIS from other jihadist groups.²⁵⁶ This emphasis on expansion necessitated a showdown with any other groups, including the Kurds.

The first reason for ISIS to attack Kurdistan was based on the strategies driven by the manifestos of expansion ideology. Dr. Fadl argued that the near Muslim apostate leaders are much more dangerous than the far infidel Christian or Jewish leaders.²⁵⁷ According to Fawaz A. Gerges, similar to Naji and Muhajir, Dr. Fadl had called for this hostility against the near enemies that are led by infidels and justified it based on the Fatwa of Ibn Taymiyya. Muhajir and Naji argue that fighting these regimes is an obligation (*Fard al-Ayn*) on all Muslims who have reached the age of 15. Gerges believes that Dr. Fadl relied on and cited Ibn Taymiyya and was affected by the beliefs of Sayed Qutb. He expands the classification and list of infidel countries to include any state that is ruled by positivist secular law. For facing this type of enemy, Dr. Fadl believes that, “Muslims should display their animosity and hatred toward those living infidels,” “disavow their infidel principles such as communism and democracy,” and “isolate themselves even by migration from the infidels’ land.”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 139–42.

²⁵⁵ Ganguly and Al - Istrabadi, *The Future of ISIS*, 29.

²⁵⁶ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi’s Message as Caliph,” Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, July 2, 2014, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/15040/abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-message-as-caliph>.

²⁵⁷ Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 38.

²⁵⁸ Gerges, 38.

Fishman believes that the ideology and bloodthirstiness of the tactics applied by ISIS strongly depended on the work of the radical jihadist Abu Bakir Naji, *The Management of Savagery*.²⁵⁹ According to Naji, in *The Management of Savagery*, the Islamic state should maintain and expand. This work provided a strategic plan for establishing ISIS as blueprinted by al-Zarqawi,²⁶⁰ or establishing an Islamic state.²⁶¹ This also matches what Gerges has stated when he talks about the eminent targets of ISIS. Gerges agrees with Fishman that ISIS built its ideology based on *The Management of Savagery*, which validates targeting the near and far enemies. Gerges states that according to *The Management of Savagery*, before attacking a country, there should be a master plan for commencing these attacks against two or three countries before initiating attacks on the next targets.

Similarly, the points made by Naji also parallel what Dr. Fadl contends in his book *The Essentials of Making Ready [for Jihad]*, when he states that it is essential for jihad to take both “the near and the far enemies” or the hosting countries as their targets.²⁶² ISIS prioritized the near enemies like the Iraqi Shiite government.²⁶³ Yet, he believes that targeting the near enemies is also important, when these near enemies have rulers that apply the rules of infidel laws and democracy. Gerges goes further and states that, “attacking these rulers, whom he [Fadl] called as *Murtadeen* (apostate), should even take the priority over the Jihad against Jews.”²⁶⁴ Additionally, he believes that it is more important to attack the near enemies because “they are closer to us and they have abandoned and denounced Islamic beliefs.”²⁶⁵ This projected expansion of ISIS includes the current Kurdistan Region as a secularly ruled system and beyond to include some neighboring countries, such

²⁵⁹ Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 38–45.

²⁶⁰ Fishman, 39.

²⁶¹ Fishman, 44.

²⁶² Gerges, *ISIS*, 38.

²⁶³ Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 63.

²⁶⁴ Gerges, *ISIS*, 38.

²⁶⁵ Gerges, 38.

as Iran, which is Shiite dominated and one of the main targets of the Salafī jihadist groups like ISIS.²⁶⁶ Figure 1 shows the Projected Map of ISIS.



Figure 1. The Projected Map of the Future Caliphate of ISIS.²⁶⁷

Unlike the strategy of al-Qaeda, which wanted to target foreigners and apostates and push foreign intervention in Islamic countries and jihad globally, the initial strategy of ISIS was to focus inward. Additionally, al-Qaeda sought the role of unifying Muslim countries as its obligation, but ISIS was conquering land and establishing a caliphate for Muslims, and the applied role in the state that ISIS wanted to create was Islamic Sharia.²⁶⁸ Because the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was within of ISIS's projected expansion plans it wanted to include Kurdistan within the states that it wanted to conquer and rule. Thus, Kurdistan Region was an eminent target of ISIS.

The second reason for ISIS to attack Kurdistan was Kurdistan's secular and diverse culture threatened ISIS's monolithic ideology. ISIS designated some of the groups, nations, regimes, and persons as their main targets. Their main targets included groups that did not

²⁶⁶ Peter Mansoor, “Top Ten Origins: The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS),” *Origins: Current Event in Historical Perspective*, December 2012, <http://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/11122014-top-ten-origins-islamic-state-iraq-and-al-sham-isis>.

267 Mansoor.

²⁶⁸ Alexander, *The Islamic State*, 39.

support ISIS, like the secular Muslim nations, regimes, and entities; Shiites and other Islamic groups that stood against ISIS's ultimate goals; Christians; Yazidis; and inhabitants of the lands that they had conquered and sought to conquer, but which do not accept the ideology of ISIS.²⁶⁹

According to the agenda of ISIS, all secular countries would become targets of ISIS; because the Kurdistan Region is ethnically and religiously diverse, it had to be targeted. With the secular system that it has, Kurdistan Region perfectly meets one more criterion of the parameters that ISIS has set for the nations or states they are going to target. Kurdistan Region has a secular system and allows all religions to practice their beliefs freely within the Kurdistan Region.²⁷⁰

The fundamentalism of ISIS was incompatible with the Kurdish tendency to openness and tolerance. Thus, antagonism of ISIS manifested itself even before the establishment of the territorial caliphate. The Islamic radical groups viewed the Kurds as their enemies, especially because the Kurds are the descendants of the glorious Islamic leader Salahuddin al Ayyubid and do not follow the path of their ancestor. Also, the Islamic State believes that the Kurds are not abiding by Sharia laws, they helped infidels, they have become "tails of Jews," and they are run by apostate laws. As the leader of AQI, which rebranded itself as the ISI, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi called the Kurds the ISI's enemies who are going to be attacked in the future. In his speech "The Cry of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi" in 2004, he blamed the Kurds for deviating from the Islamic path and stated they are acting as a bridge to favor the goals of the United States. They prohibit the Da'wa, and he admitted that the Kurds will be attacked by the ISI as soon as they get their chance. Al-Zarqawi further reiterated his point about the Kurds as he stated:

In their two Barazani and Talabani halves, these have given the bargain of their hands and the fruit of their hearts to the Americans. They have opened their land to the Jews and become their rear base and a Trojan horse for their plans. They (the Jews) infiltrate through their lands, drape themselves in their banners, and take them as a bridge over which to cross for financial

²⁶⁹ Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 38.

²⁷⁰ Philip S. Hadji, "The Case for Kurdish Statehood in Iraq," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 41, no. 2-3 (2009): 522.

control and economic hegemony, as well as for the espionage base for which they have built a large structure the length and breadth of that land. In general, Islam's voice has died out among them – the Kurds – and the glimmer of religion has weakened in their homes. The Iraqi Da`wa has intoxicated them, and the good people among them, few as they are, are oppressed and fear that birds will carry them away.²⁷¹

In 2007 when the Peshmerga participated in building a new security system for Iraq, the spokesman of the ISI terrorist group, Abu Maysara al-Iraqi, released a statement about the Kurds through their minister of information, which was published by al-Fajr Media. The spokesman threatened the Kurdish political leadership and Kurdish Peshmerga, stating:

The tails [collaborators] of the Jews, Talabani and Barzani, having decided to send elements of the apostate Peshmerga forces to Baghdad to take part, together with the Safawi [Shiite] forces, in the so-called 'New Security Plan' upon the request and insistence of Tariq al-Hashimi, the Islamic State of Iraq, therefore, warns and threatens those who may think of harming our Sunni people in beloved Baghdad. We also remind those apostate forces of what happened to their Safawi allies in Baghdad, and of the killing and punishment of the agent forces in Mosul Province by the Mujahidin of the Islamic State there. We tell them that the Martyrs Brigades of the Islamic State, especially the Ansar martyrs, cannot wait to confront you so as to speed your arrival in hell. You will see in the coming days, God willing, what will happen to you if you dare touch the Sunnis in Baghdad and assist the rejectionist Safawis. Success and guidance come from God.²⁷²

This hatred of the Kurds remained in the successor of al-Zarqawi. For example, in 2007, the successor of al-Zarqawi, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, praised the Kurds in the early stages of Islam and called them the wolves that were attacking the enemies of Allah. Nevertheless, he stated that the Kurds now are different and now they are enemies of Islam:

But today the situation was turned upside down. The Kurdish leaders are working for the fixation of the state of al-Rafida in Mesopotamia; it is a subjective friendship from both parties. The hidden spite of al-Rafida on Salahuddin, may Allah grant his soul mercy, is well known and their hostility towards the Kurds is very old, for they depend on some narration

²⁷¹ Professor Craig Whiteside, email message to author, November 15, 2019.

²⁷² Professor Craig Whiteside, email message to author, November 18, 2019: Islamic State of Iraq, Official Statement on Kurds Participating in "New Security Plan," al-Fajr Media Center, 19 January 2007, posted to the Ana al-Muslim website.

falsely attributed to, Ja'afar al -Sadiq, says that the Kurds are originally Jinn! And it is not permissible to marry them or eat their food! And this is the attitude of him who takes the interest as a god instead of worshipping Allah, being colored like a chameleon.²⁷³

He further claims that the Kurds have forgotten the path of the Almighty through pursuing nationalism. Abu Omer claims that the Kurds are infidels, and Kurdish leadership has ceased the Islamic teaching in Kurdistan; meanwhile, communism, atheism, and secularism have spread among the Kurds and not praying has become a common thing among the Kurds. Abu Omer claims that the Kurdish leadership has oppressed the Islamic call and oppressed the Islamic scientists and has made them side with their apostate system. He claims that the Kurds are not real Muslims as they have liquor stores and their women go out unveiled or “half naked.” At the end of his statement about the Kurds he promises the Kurds that he is going to invade Kurdistan one day, stating, “O Grandsons of Salahuddin, by Allah we will not let you a prey for seculars, we shall provide you with our blood, we shall creep to free your region from the dirt of the atheist to keep your pure Islamic identity, for how miserable is him who gives loyalty to the race and party before he gives it to the religion and al-Aqida.”²⁷⁴

Kurdish democratic practices have also made them the target of Islamic radical groups. For example, one such group that was established by radical Islamists was Ansar al-Sunnah. This group was self-described as an “army of Jihadists, scholars, and military experts,” known for having an anti-Kurdish political and region’s nationalist identity; the end goal of this group was establishing an Islamic State in Iraq.²⁷⁵ The main part of their agenda was rejecting the principles of democracy, “the manmade laws,” and establishing an Islamic state in Iraq that would work in accordance with the rules of Sharia law; rejecting negotiations with infidels; and attacking the U.S. forces and Kurdish security forces and

²⁷³ Professor Craig Whiteside, email message to author, November 18, 2019.

²⁷⁴ Professor Craig Whiteside, email message, November 21, 2019, Islamic State of Iraq, Official Statement of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi “And if You Cease, it Will be Better for You,” 2007,

²⁷⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iraq's Sunni Insurgents: Looking Beyond Al Qaeda* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007), 4, <http://www.comw.org/warreport/fulltext/070716cordesman.pdf>.

whoever collaborated with them.²⁷⁶ Furthermore, what united Ansar al-Islam and other radical groups that later helped in creating ISIS is the ideology, which both were established based on the manifesto of Sayyed Qutb.²⁷⁷

The third reason why ISIS's ideology demanded that they attack Kurdistan is the threat that Kurdish nationalism posed to ISIS's universal brand of radical Islam. The end goal of the Kurds is having a self-identity and being known as Kurds, but the end goal of the radical Islamic groups is having an Islamic state that follows the rules of Islamic Sharia. This distinction between the Kurds and the Islamic groups created an incompatibility between the two. This distinction is academically argued by Jillian Schwedler. In her article *Islamic Identity: Myth, Menace, or Mobilizer?* she discusses the Islamic identity and categorizes the class of identity according to three different groups: first, how the people identify themselves; second, the identity that emerged because of the collective concerns between individuals and collective identities; third, the social understanding of identity in terms of biology and science, race, and gender.²⁷⁸ The author believes Kurds belong to the first group. If the Kurds are being asked whether they are Kurds or Muslims, or to identify with the countries they live in, they will answer in both cases that they are Kurds.²⁷⁹ By comparison, the Islamic radical groups do not want to see national trends in groups, but they want to establish a community of Muslims that is ruled by Sharia law, which gives them a transnational identity.²⁸⁰

The persistence of the president of the Kurdistan Region on the question of a referendum for independence created a sense of fear among the enemies of the Kurdistan Region and united them to scheme against the Kurdistan Region.²⁸¹ The denial policies of Baghdad made the authorities think seriously about holding the referendum and reiterating

²⁷⁶ Jillian Schwedler, "Islamic Identity: Myth, Menace, or Mobilizer?," *SAIS Review* 21, no. 2 (2001): 4.

²⁷⁷ MEMRI, "The Sheikh of the Slaughterers."

²⁷⁸ Schwedler, "Islamic Identity," 2–4.

²⁷⁹ Schwedler, 2.

²⁸⁰ Schwedler, 5–7.

²⁸¹ Shakhi, *Kurdistan, Heading towards Eternity*, 76.

the Kurdistan people's right to self-determination.²⁸² Despite hearing these demands and the reactions of the Kurdistan Region about the marginalization of Kurds by Baghdad, the authorities in Baghdad were reluctant. On July 3, 2014, president Barzani visited the parliament of Kurdistan and asked them to speed up forming the Higher Commission for Election and Referendum. Furthermore, Barzani asked the parliament to make arrangements for holding an independence referendum. President Barzani emphasized that the Iraqi Constitution had stated that the Kurds are entitled to their right to self-determination.²⁸³ He also stated that, "the time has come to decide our fate, and we should not wait for other people to decide it for us."²⁸⁴

D. CONCLUSION

The development of ISIS went through different phases. Initially it started as an affiliate group of al-Qaeda then changed with the training camp of Herat and its commander, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi was a pragmatic leader who avoided attacking Kurds as he prioritized attacking Shiites and sparking the civil war between Sunnis and Shiites. Al-Zarqawi followed a strategy for establishing an Islamic state. After the death of al-Zarqawi and two of his successors, Abu Bakr Baghdadi took power. Baghdadi was a Salafi and held more to making the prevailing ideology his version of Islam or Salafism. ISIS attacked Kurdistan for ideological reasons as ISIS had four types of states as its main targets: one, Islamic entities with an international agenda; two, Islamic entities with nationalism trends; three, nationalist entities with an Islamic agenda; four, secular entities with a democratic agenda. The strategy that ISIS had set was having a geographically large Islamic state ruled by their version of Islam to include Kurdistan. Finally, ISIS was more incentivized by the enemies of Kurdish independence who sided with ISIS and made ISIS stop their attack on Baghdad. Instead, the group attacked Kurdistan and the Peshmerga forces.

²⁸² "Bakhtyar Shakhi, 77.

²⁸³ Bakhtyar Shakhi, 77.

²⁸⁴ Dexter Filkins, "The Fight of Their Lives," *New Yorker*, September 22, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/29/fight-lives>.

IV. THE PESHMERGA AND THE WAR AGAINST ISIS (2014–2017)

From 2014 to 2017, the Kurdish Peshmerga demonstrated that subnational forces can be both militarily effective and humanitarian, under certain conditions. Despite having suffered a surprise attack by ISIS and genocide against the Yezidis, the Peshmerga demonstrated remarkable restraint in dealing with liberated populations and enemy prisoners. External support from a coalition of democratic countries meant that the Peshmerga were exposed to norms of human rights and that they had an incentive to follow those norms. A robust system of command and control meant that junior soldiers obeyed directives from senior leadership to respect human rights. While the war against ISIS involved defensive and offensive operations along a 1,050-kilometer-long front, three offensive operations by the Peshmerga exemplify the conditions under which subnational forces respect human rights while fighting terrorism. This chapter consists of three case studies of the al-Rabia, Shingal mountain, and Bashiqa operations.

A. Peshmerga External Support, Training, and Command and Control

ISIS demonstrated its military prowess by seizing a large amount of territory from the Iraqi and Syrian armies. On July 10, 2014, the terrorist group managed to control the second largest city in Iraq, Mosul. The Iraqi army commanders, Abboud Qanbar, Ali Ghedan, and Mahdi Gharawi, fled their command posts in panic, climbed into an Iraqi helicopter, and escaped to Erbil. The flight of the Iraqi leaders led to a breakdown of the command and control, which caused the morale of the Iraqi army to collapse.²⁸⁵ Soon after, the group managed to defeat the Iraqi army and approach the capital of Iraq, Baghdad.

The conquest of Mosul greatly expanded ISIS's capabilities after seizing the stockpiles of arms from the Iraqi army and the Syrian forces. Most of the advanced tactical weapons that ISIS captured and used came from Russia, the United States, and China.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁵ Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State*, 15.

²⁸⁶ Nance, *Defeating ISIS*, 330–40.

Some of ISIS's weapons were far more advanced than what Peshmerga forces had, especially weapons that ISIS had obtained from the Iraqi army.²⁸⁷ For example, after the influx of the Iraqi army, ISIS managed to seize control of 30 of the most advanced U.S. tanks (Abrams M1A1) that were given to the Iraqi army by the United States and other arms that they received from different sources.²⁸⁸ ISIS took advantage of its new capabilities and changed their course of action. Suddenly, the group attacked the KRG territories.

On August 3, 2014, ISIS launched an offensive operation against the Peshmerga. ISIS named its operation after their dead war minister "Asadullah al-Balawi."²⁸⁹ Although the Peshmerga fought back, ISIS's material advantage quickly overwhelmed the Peshmerga's forward defenses. The first phase of the operation targeted the town of Sinjar, which is known in Kurdish as Shingal. ISIS attacked Shingal in a pincer attack from Tal Afar in the east from Syria in the west. Some of the Arab villagers joined ISIS in their attack against Shingal.²⁹⁰ During their operation against the town of Shingal, ISIS massacred thousands of Yazidis and abducted thousands of Yazidi females. Some of these Yazidis were as young as 12 years old.²⁹¹ This attack caused a massive humanitarian catastrophe. Those who managed to escape were trapped on Shingal mountain top. The number of Yazidi civilians who were trapped reached tens of thousands of civilians.²⁹² The trapped Yazidi families suffered severely on the mountains and lacked food and necessities. Therefore, a wave of U.S-led coalition aircraft dropped food for these people.²⁹³

After gaining momentum, ISIS continued its offensive operations against the Kurdistan Region through attacking the adjacent cities of Makhmour and Gwer on August 8,

²⁸⁷ Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 47.

²⁸⁸ Nance, *Defeating ISIS*, 330–31.

²⁸⁹ Nance, 246.

²⁹⁰ Susan Shand, *Sinjar: 14 Days That Saved the Yazidis from Islamic State* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2018), 46–48.

²⁹¹ Nance, *Defeating ISIS*, 247.

²⁹² Valeria Cetorelli et al., "Mortality and Kidnapping Estimates for the Yazidi Population in the Area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A Retrospective Household Survey," *PLoS Medicine* 14, no. 5 (2017): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002297>.

²⁹³ Nance, *Defeating ISIS*, 247.

2014. The first time the U.S. fighters conducted airstrikes on ISIS was in Makhmour confrontations.²⁹⁴ The terrorist group came closer to the capital of the Kurdistan Region, Erbil.²⁹⁵ The threat that ISIS posed to Erbil was a redline for the United States.²⁹⁶ Then president of the United States, Barack Obama, announced a military action against the terrorist group, despite limited support from the public. During the announcement Obama stated, “I know that many of you are rightly concerned about any American military action in Iraq, even limited strikes like these.”²⁹⁷ In September of the same year, Obama expanded American military actions against ISIS and stated that, “our objective is clear: we will degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.”²⁹⁸ He also mentioned that the international coalition would strike ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria.²⁹⁹

ISIS was stopped by a combination of the Kurdish Peshmerga and the U.S. air support.³⁰⁰ Scholarship on airpower emphasizes that airpower alone is ineffective; only when combined with competent ground forces can air power be effective.³⁰¹ The Peshmerga forces, as an allied force with the Iraqi federal government, received orders from the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Peshmerga forces defended four provinces, which had the Kurdish population. After its initial setbacks, the Kurdish Peshmerga demonstrated itself as a formidable force that expelled the terrorist group right after their initial attack late in 2014.³⁰²

²⁹⁴ Helene Cooper, Mark Landler, and Alissa J. Rubin, “Obama Allows Limited Airstrikes on ISIS,” *New York Times*, August 8, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/08/world/middleeast/obama-weighs-military-strikes-to-aid-trapped-iraqis-officials-say.html>.

²⁹⁵ Shakhi, *Kurdistan, Heading towards Eternity*, 92.

²⁹⁶ Shand, *Sinjar*, 122–23.

²⁹⁷ Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 48.

²⁹⁸ Stern and Berger, 49.

²⁹⁹ Stern and Berger, 49.

³⁰⁰ Charountaki, “From Resistance to Military Institutionalisation,” 1596.

³⁰¹ Phil Haun and Colin Jackson, “Breaker of Armies: Air Power in the Easter Offensive and the Myth of Linebacker I and II in the Vietnam War,” *International Security* 40, no. 3 (2016): 139–78, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00226.

³⁰² Ganguly and Al - Istrabadi, *The Future of ISIS*, 104.

After the KRG received support from the coalition forces and established a joint operation room with the Kurdistan Region Security Council, the U.S. forces started a new phase of war against ISIS. The establishment of the operation room was important for fostering the coordination between the Peshmerga forces and the coalition forces, which later resulted in defeating ISIS. The efficiency of the coordination between the U.S. forces and the Kurdistan Region Security Council, which was overseeing Peshmerga operations, incentivized other coalition forces to join the operation room.³⁰³ The U.S-led coalition forces intensified their air campaign and started repelling ISIS attacks, which helped the Peshmerga to conduct many offensive operations against ISIS. Through providing crucial intelligence information and accurate targets to the U.S-led coalition, the joint operation gained a positive reputation.³⁰⁴ Both the Peshmerga forces and ISIS militants were shifting their positions continuously during the conflict, which made targeting the enemy harder, but the operation room's accurate coordination enabled targeting ISIS accurately.

The targeted airstrikes that were conducted through the operation room throughout the whole operations of Peshmerga against ISIS minimized friendly fire and civilian casualties.³⁰⁵ Despite coalition airstrikes being close to residential areas, the operation room ensured the safety of civilians by accurate deconfliction of the ISIS location by ground elements of the operation room and the accuracy of airstrikes, and the civilians were kept safe. According to Shakhi, the safety of the civilians is one of the chief successes of this operation room. Additionally, the rescue operation and providing food and humanitarian aid for the Yazidi refugees on Mount Shingal was another accomplishment of the joint operation room.³⁰⁶ For the KRG and the Peshmerga the key success scales were protecting civilians and avoiding human rights abuses.

Countries throughout the world have tried to minimize the human rights abuses by their militaries, but many lack the state capacity to implement the direct command and control

³⁰³ Shakhi, *Kurdistan, Heading towards Eternity*, 107.

³⁰⁴ Shakhi, 109.

³⁰⁵ Shakhi, 108.

³⁰⁶ Shakhi, 109.

that would restrain their forces.³⁰⁷ There are 196 countries in the world that acknowledge International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and are signatory members of Geneva Convention, yet many of their armies still violate human rights.³⁰⁸ That includes the military forces of democratic countries.³⁰⁹ Subnational forces who lack state capability should therefore be especially prone to civil rights abuse; the case of ISIS therefore fits this logic.

By contrast, the humanitarian response of the Peshmerga defies the expectations of many scholars. Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Aliyev believe that subnational forces generally violate human rights. They argue that subnational forces are more prone to human rights abuses for three principal reasons. First, subnational forces are more likely to inflict collateral damage because they are untrained. Second, because they sustain many casualties, they seek revenge upon civilians. Third, because subnational forces can lose power when wars end, they prolong wars in order to maintain their supply line of external supports and indigenous sources.³¹⁰

The subnational Peshmerga, however, did not have these problems because of their allies, command and control, and their integration into local communities. The following sections show that external support from a coalition of democratic countries meant that the Peshmerga were exposed to norms of human rights and that they had an incentive to follow those norms. Additionally, a system of command and control meant that junior soldiers obeyed directives from senior leadership to respect human rights.

1. Case Study of Al-Rabia: The Peshmerga Partners with Arab Tribes

One of the first operations conducted by the Peshmerga against ISIS was the liberation of al-Rabia. Al-Rabia is a strategic town located in the northwest of Iraq, in the Tal Afar sub-

³⁰⁷ Neil A. Englehart, "State Capacity, State Failure, and Human Rights," *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 2 (2009): 169, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343308100713>.

³⁰⁸ Middle East Research Institute, *Compliance of Armed Forces with International Humanitarian Law May 2016 Compliance of Armed Forces with International Humanitarian Law* (Erbil, Iraq: Middle East Research Institute, 2016), 1, <http://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Compliance-of-Armed-Forces-with-IHL-MERI-Policy-Note-May-2016.pdf>.

³⁰⁹ Courtenay R. Conrad, "Why Democracy Does Not Always Improve Human Rights," Scholars Strategy Network, October 18, 2013, <https://scholars.org/contribution/why-democracy-does-not-always-improve-human-rights>.

³¹⁰ Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, "Militias in Civil Wars"; Aliyev, "Why Are Some Civil Wars More Lethal Than Others?"; Aliyev, "'No Peace, No War' Proponents?"

district that is located on the border of Iraq and Syria. The majority of the population of this town are rural Sunni Arabs from the Shamar tribe.³¹¹ Al-Rabia holds a small reserve of oil. Yet, the strategic location of al-Rabia makes it more important than its economic potential. The town is important to the Kurdistan Region as it links the region with the densely populated areas of Shingal at the south of this town.³¹² The location of al-Rabia was also important for ISIS as it provided a good communication and supply lines between Iraq and Syria.

The liberation operation of al-Rabia started on September 29, 2014.³¹³ At the beginning of the operation, the civilians escaped the town towards the Syrian border on foot for their safety.³¹⁴ The Peshmerga forces started the operation of liberating al-Rabia with the support of the coalition through airstrikes, their advice, and their assistance. Despite the strength of ISIS during that time, the Peshmerga forces were able to take control of this town from ISIS for two reasons.

First, the Peshmerga's willingness to partner with Sunni Arab tribesmen was important. The tribal leader of the Shamar Sheikh Ali stated that they agreed on the details of the operation three months earlier, and Shamar and the Kurds established that they were facing a common enemy.³¹⁵ The support of the local community through providing intelligence helped the Peshmerga forces liberate al-Rabia.³¹⁶ The information about ISIS allowed the Peshmerga to avoid ISIS strongpoints in their attack. This also reinforced to Peshmerga that the enemy was ISIS, not all Arabs. This contributed to the Peshmerga's fair dealings with the liberated population afterwards.

³¹¹ "Kurds Seize Iraq/Syria Border Post; Sunni Tribe Joins Fight against Islamic State," Reuters, September 30, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-idUSKCN0HO12G20140930>.

³¹² Andras Derzsi-Horvath, "Iraq after ISIL: Rabi'a," August 4, 2017, <https://www.gppi.net/2017/08/04/iraq-after-isil-rabia>.

³¹³ "Kurds Seize Iraq/Syria Border Post; Sunni Tribe Joins Fight against Islamic State," *Jerusalem Post*, October 1, 2014, <https://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=376723>.

³¹⁴ Khidr Khalat, "Al-Peshmerga tuharer al-Rabia wa tastaed lel-hujum a'la Sinjar Jaridat al-Sabah al-Jadid" [The Peshmerga forces liberated al-Rabia and are preparing to liberate Shingal], al-Sabah al-Jadid, September 2014. <https://newsabah.com/newspaper/21263>.

³¹⁵ Reuters, "Kurds Seize Iraq/Syria Border Post."

³¹⁶ Derzsi-Horvath, "Iraq after ISIL."

Second, coalition fire support enabled the Peshmerga's success. A day before the launch of this operation, the Kurdish Peshmerga were supported by a pre-assault fire provided by coalition airstrikes.³¹⁷ This fire support helped to offset ISIS's advantage in equipment. Because the coalition used precision munitions, they were able to limit damage to civilians. The power of the coalition and their care to avoid civilian targeting reinforced to the Peshmerga that they needed to be careful themselves in dealing with vulnerable civilians.

After full liberation of the town, the residents of al-Rabia returned and welcomed the Kurdish Peshmerga warmly.³¹⁸ During the liberation operation, a commander of the Peshmerga forces stated that they counted as many as 50 dead militants in the battleground; he also stated that the coalition airstrikes had killed 22 ISIS militants.³¹⁹ The same commander reiterated to the source that the Peshmerga forces would defuse the Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) that ISIS had planted on the main roads and the connecting roads of the neighborhood.³²⁰

After the liberation of al-Rabia, the president and the commander in chief of all armed forces of Kurdistan, Masoud Barzani, met with the tribal leaders of al-Rabia. During the meeting Barzani stated:

We strongly hold to the principle of coexistence that has always existed between the Kurds and Arabs despite the oppression of consecutive Iraqi regimes. We stand against the methods of retaliation and we will fight against whoever tries to fuel the war between the Arabs and the Kurds and Daesh had failed in fueling this war as well.... Sunni Arabs have suffered the most from Daesh's destructions. Sunnis have witnessed the crimes and the destruction that Daesh had brought with itself. We have to build strong relations in order to preserve your dignity as your dignity is our dignity as well. We will take the required steps for resuming services in your areas and we will urge the Government of Iraq to be responsible to its duties towards you.... Whoever had committed a crime against the population of the area will be held accountable accordingly before the law. Only the perpetrators will be held accountable for their crimes. This accountability and the judgement of the perpetrators will be

³¹⁷ Agence France-Presse, "Kurdish Peshmerga Forces Launch Offensive to Retake Isis Held Areas," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/17/kurds-peshmerga-offensive-isis-sinjar-territory-mosul>.

³¹⁸ Khalat, "Al-Peshmerga tuharer al-Rabia."

³¹⁹ Khalat.

³²⁰ Khalat.

pursued far from hatred and revenge. The dignity of those who decided not to join ISIS will be preserved.³²¹

After the liberation of al-Rabia, the Kurdistan Regional Government formed a brigade for the Arab tribes of the area, further integrating locals into the Peshmerga. The formation of this force helped in establishing a connection between the Peshmerga forces and the Arab community of al-Rabia and surrounding areas. Additionally, the force was a safety measure for the Arab community as it could withhold any future incursions from groups like ISIS. This came after the brigade of 1,000 fighters was formed to operate under the umbrella of the Ministry of Peshmerga.³²² Establishing this force was a net positive step because in addition to enhancing communal support, the forces helped in providing important intelligence to the Peshmerga. The tribal leaders showed their support to the Peshmerga as they showed their readiness to fight alongside the Peshmerga forces in the frontlines.³²³ Figure 2 shows the scheme of maneuver of the Peshmerga forces during the al-Rabia Operation.

³²¹ Bassim Faransis, “Barzani Yata’ahad al-tassadi liman yoqa’ bain al-Arabi wa al-Akrad, Al-markaz Al-lobnani lilabhath wa al-estsharaat” [Barzani promises to confront those who create tensions between the Kurds and Arabs], Lebanese Center for Research and Consulting, March 2015, <http://www.center-lcrc.net/index.php?s=news&id=11134>.

³²² Derzsi-Horvath, “Iraq after ISIL.”

³²³ Derzsi-Horvath.

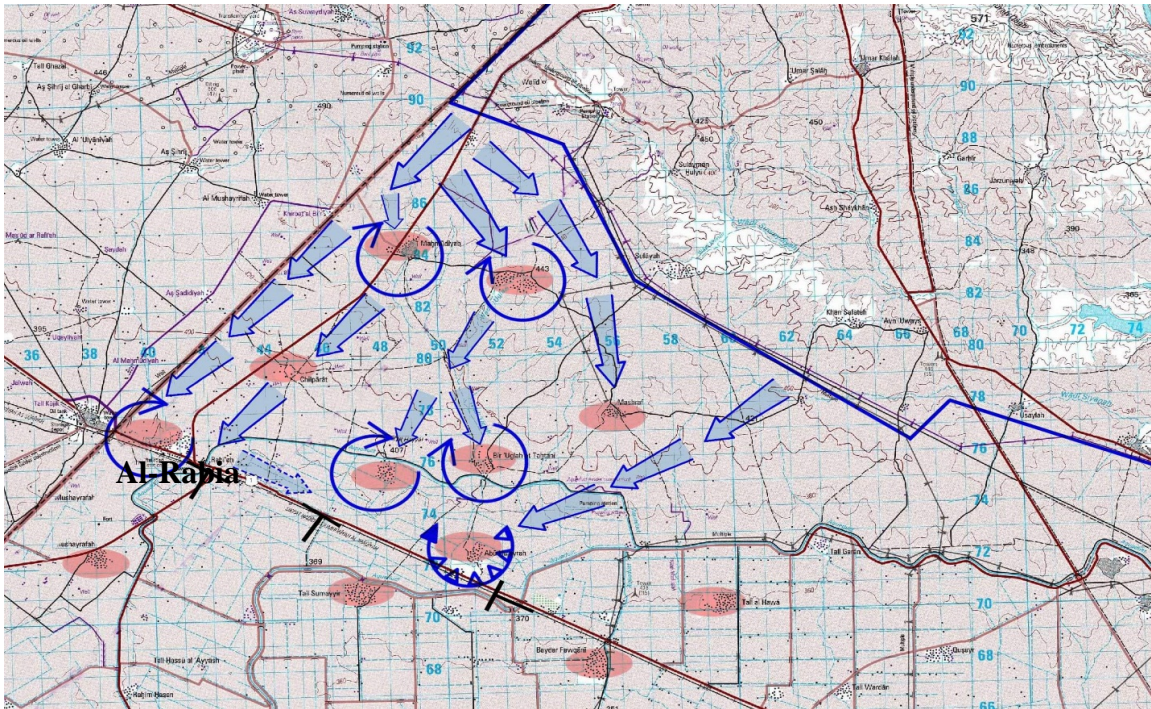


Figure 2. The Plan for Liberating al-Rabia from ISIS, Implemented on September 30, 2014.³²⁴

Figure 2 shows that the Peshmerga forces allocated a force to take the border prong in order to help civilians who fled to the border. Also, Peshmerga forces did not encircle al-Rabia in order to prevent collateral damage and civilian casualties.

The al-Rabia operation was important because it was the first step towards liberating Shingal and it demonstrated that the Peshmerga forces were able to defeat ISIS. At that time, several thousand Yazidis were trapped on Mount Shingal. The Peshmerga forces that stayed on Mount Shingal in order to protect the trapped Yazidis who were awaiting the other Peshmerga forces to finish the al-Rabia Operation first. After the al-Rabia Operation, Shingal was the next step for the political and military leadership in Kurdistan.³²⁵

³²⁴ Source: Shakhi, *Kurdistan, Heading towards Eternity*, 222–23.

³²⁵ Agence France-Presse, “Kurdish Peshmerga Forces Launch Offensive to Retake Isis Held Areas.”

2. Case Study of the Operation Breaking the Siege of Mount Shingal

Shingal is located on the border of Iraq and Syria. The majority of the residents of Shingal were Yazidis. The number of the Yazidis in Shingal before ISIS's attack was 400,000 citizens.³²⁶ The Yazidis are Kurds whose religion is neither Islam nor Christian; they are different from the Sunni or Shia Kurds.³²⁷ Some of the practices of the Yazidis come from the Zoroastrian Region and others from parts of the Abrahamic religions. ISIS called the Yazidis worshipers of the devil.³²⁸ Because of their religion, ISIS persecuted the Yazidis, mass murdered them, and treated Yazidi females as sex slaves.³²⁹ After the attack of ISIS on Shingal, many Yazidis fled to nearby Mount Shingal. Thousands of Yazidis were trapped on the mountain and surrounded on all sides by ISIS terrorist fighters. Adding to the direness of the situation was the lack of food and water. High temperatures and dehydration caused many Yazidis to suffer and die.³³⁰

After the announcement of President Obama to provide air support to the Iraqi and Peshmerga forces came the announcement of a mission to provide food and water for the trapped Yazidis through airdrop missions.³³¹ These airdrop missions were conducted by C-130 and C-17 airplanes, which were escorted by F-18 fighter jets. Obama made the relief mission his priority, as he stated that these civilians were "hiding high up on the mountain, with little but the clothes on their backs.... They're without food, they're without water," he said. "People are starving. And children are dying of thirst. These innocent families are faced with a horrible choice: descend the mountain and be slaughtered or stay and slowly die of

³²⁶ Gunes Tezcur, "Three Years Ago, the Islamic State Massacred Yazidis in Iraq. Why?," *Washington Post*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/15/three-years-ago-the-islamic-state-massacred-yazidis-in-iraq-why/?noredirect=on>.

³²⁷ Michael Luongo, "Fighting Back with Faith: Inside the Yezidis' Iraqi Temple," *Daily Beast*, August 21, 2014, sec. arts-and-culture, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/21/fighting-back-with-faith-inside-the-yazidis-iraqi-temple>.

³²⁸ Nance, *Defeating ISIS*, 247.

³²⁹ Luongo, "Fighting Back with Faith."

³³⁰ Lizzie Dearden, "Almost 10,000 Yazidis 'Killed or Kidnapped in Isis Genocide but True Scale of Horror May Never Be Known,'" *The Independent*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-islamic-state-yazidi-sex-slaves-genocide-sinjar-death-toll-number-kidnapped-study-un-lse-a7726991.html>.

³³¹ Cooper, Landler, and Rubin, "Obama Allows Limited Airstrikes on ISIS."

thirst and hunger.”³³² One of the main reasons behind Obama’s announcement soon thereafter to launch the air campaign against ISIS was the fact that Yazidis faced the risk of genocide and mass atrocities.³³³

Helping the Yazidis was also a key reason why the Peshmerga focused first on Shingal instead of on more strategically vital areas. For example, ISIS had occupied positions near the Kirkuk oilfields; these oilfields were critical to Kurdistan’s financial livelihood.³³⁴ There were therefore strong reasons for securing the area around Kirkuk instead of focusing on Shingal. The Peshmerga’s commitment to supporting human rights, however, led them to focus on Shingal. Having liberated al-Rabia and surrounding areas, Kurdish political and military leadership were keen on liberating Mount Shingal and breaking the imposed siege of ISIS on the mountain.

On December 17, 2014, the Peshmerga forces started their operation to liberate Shingal. The starting point of the Peshmerga forces were the areas of al-Rabia and Zummar that were liberated by Peshmerga forces earlier. In this operation, 8,000 Peshmerga troops participated.³³⁵ In less than two days, the Peshmerga forces managed to liberate 700 square kilometers from ISIS.³³⁶ According to the commander of the operation, General Zaem Ali, the Peshmerga forces had an inclusive plan for liberating these areas and the enemy did not show resistance except by deploying car bombs.³³⁷ This allowed the operation to be completed in two days.

Support from the coalition forces was crucial for the success of this operation. The main support that the U.S-led coalition forces provided for this operation was an intense air campaign in the days before the operation or pre-assault fire and airstrikes during the operation

³³² Cooper, Landler, and Rubin.

³³³ Agence France-Presse, “Kurdish Peshmerga Forces Launch Offensive to Retake Isis Held Areas.”

³³⁴ Dmitry Zhdannikov, “Iraq, Kurdistan Jointly Export Kirkuk Oil Again: Trading Sources,” Reuters, September 1, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-kurdistan-oil-idUSKCN1174Y1>.

³³⁵ Jamie Dettmer, “Iraqi Kurds Get Their Groove Back, End Siege of Mount Sinjar,” *Daily Beast*, December 20, 2014, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/12/20/iraqi-kurds-get-their-groove-back-end-siege-of-mount-sinjar>.

³³⁶ Dettmer.

³³⁷ Dettmer.

days. Although the central Iraqi government possesses a substantial air force, they chose not to cooperate with the Peshmerga. According to the U.S. commanding general of the coalition forces, Lt. Gen. James Terry, the U.S.-led coalition provided 53 airstrikes before the start of this operation.³³⁸ The airstrikes continued during the operation in support of the Peshmerga forces.³³⁹

After the siege was broken and areas between al-Rabia and Shingal Mountains liberated, the president of the Kurdistan Region and the commander in chief of the armed forces of Kurdistan, Masoud Barzani, warmly thanked the U.S.-led coalition for providing airstrikes in support of the Peshmerga in this operation. He stated, “Assistance from the coalition was noteworthy and their support was very effective.”³⁴⁰

Figure 3 shows that the Peshmerga forces used speed as an element of surprise for ISIS. Also, the Peshmerga forces used this scheme of maneuver in order to save trapped civilians quickly. The element that helped Peshmerga forces to achieve fast victory was the pre-assault intense airstrikes and close air support provided by U.S.-led coalition forces.

³³⁸ Dettmer.

³³⁹ “US-Led Coalition Air Strikes on ISIS in Iraq & Syria, 2014–2018,” Airwars Conflict Data, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://airwars.org/conflict-data/coalition-declared-strikes-timeline/>.

³⁴⁰ Sofia Barbarani, “Jihadists in Retreat as Iraqi Kurds Retake Mt Sinjar,” *Telegraph*, December 21, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/11306987/Jihadists-in-retreat-as-Iraqi-Kurds-retake-Mt-Sinjar.html>.

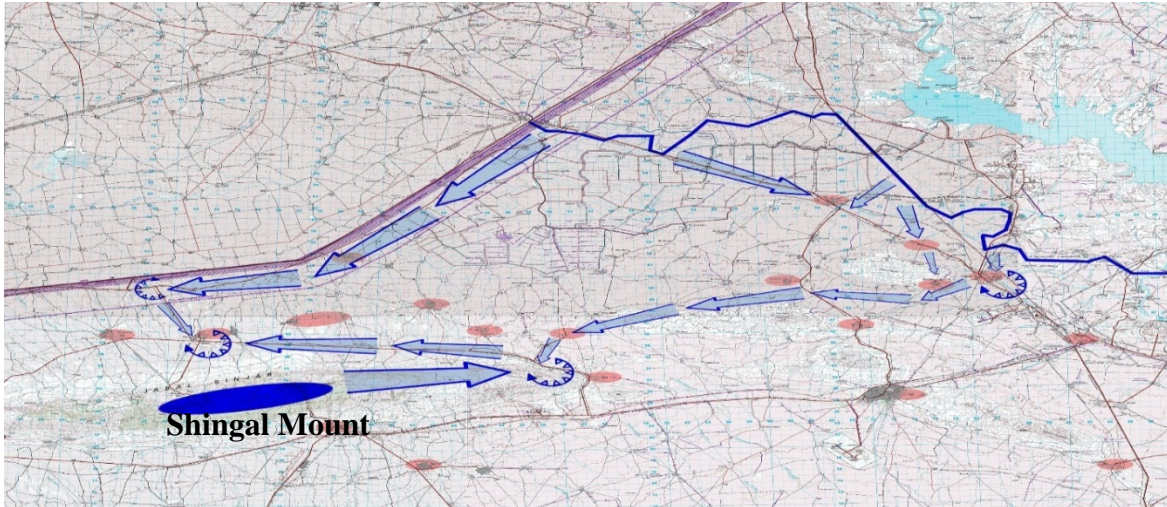


Figure 3. The Plan for the Operation of Breaking the Siege of ISIS on Mount Shingal, Implemented on December 17, 2014.³⁴¹

3. Case Study of the Bashiqa Operation

The liberation of Bashiqa provides further evidence that Peshmerga forces complied with human rights rules. Bashiqa district is 12 kilometers northeast of Mosul.³⁴² The city has a diverse population of Yazidis, Christians, Kurds, and Shiites. Before the attack of ISIS in 2014, almost 30,000 civilians lived in Bashiqa;³⁴³ almost all were forced to flee by ISIS.

On October 20, 2016, the Peshmerga forces launched a multiprong attack on the ISIS position in Bashiqa and surrounding villages in order to help the security forces of Iraq retake control of Mosul. Because of the rough terrain in the area, the Peshmerga forces relied on coalition airstrikes to suppress the enemy during their advance. The spokesman of the Ministry of Peshmerga appreciated the coalition airstrikes and called them “very

³⁴¹ Source: Shakhi, *Kurdistan, Heading towards Eternity*, 146–47.

³⁴² Idris Okuducu, “Peshmerga Forces Announce Capture of Iraq’s Bashiqa,” Anadolu Agency, August 11, 2016, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/peshmerga-forces-announce-capture-of-iraq-s-bashiqa/681229>.

³⁴³ Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, “Peshmerga Break through ISIS Lines, Surround Bashiqa City,” ARA News, October 23, 2016, <http://aranews.net/files/2016/10/peshmerga-forces-break-isis-defense-lines-surround-bashiqa-town/>.

effective.”³⁴⁴ Also, the coalition forces provided a team to be with the Peshmerga forces on the frontline. The Peshmerga forces were then able to advance into the city and liberate it.

The Peshmerga took on increased risk to themselves to rescue the civilians who were still trapped in the area. The initial thought was that the town had no civilians in it, but in fact there were civilians inside the surrounding villages. Despite the risk of running into ISIS traps, the Peshmerga forces went ahead and rescued some trapped families from the combat zone. The ISIS militants knew that Peshmerga forces prioritized the safety of civilians; the ISIS militants started using the same technique as the civilians in waving white flags to get closer to the Peshmerga forces.³⁴⁵ After that, the militants were getting closer and were attacking Peshmerga forces and detonating their bombs and vests.³⁴⁶ Despite knowing the technique ISIS militants were using, the Peshmerga forces helped civilians, providing them with water, then escorting them to safety.³⁴⁷ Later reports revealed that the rescued families were sent to the refugee camps within the boundaries of the Kurdistan Region. According to the estimations of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 144 civilians who were evacuated from this operation arrived in the refugee camps in Duhok.³⁴⁸ Three days later, more civilians were rescued and then escorted by the Peshmerga forces to the refugee camps.³⁴⁹

The Peshmerga also demonstrated a rigorous adherence to the laws of armed conflict when dealing with prisoners. During this operation, the Peshmerga forces managed to take

³⁴⁴ Van Wilgenburg.

³⁴⁵ Sahr Muhammedally, *Policy Brief on Civilian Protection in the Current Mosul Campaign* (Washington, DC: Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2017), <https://civiliansinconflict.org/publications/policy/policy-brief-civilian-protection-current-mosul-campaign/>.

³⁴⁶ Muhammedally.

³⁴⁷ “Civilians Flee ISIS-Held Town of Bashiqa,” Rudaw, October 29, 2016, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/291020162>.

³⁴⁸ “Al-mufawadhia alsamiyah lelumam almutahida leshoun alajein, mufawadhia al-lajein tuqadem al-musada leliraqeen alfaraen min qura shimal almosul.” [The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provides aid to civilians who fled from the villages of north Mosul], UNHCR, October 22, 2016, <https://www.unhcr.org/ar/news/press/2016/10/580b713c4.html>.

³⁴⁹ Catherine Robinson, “Families Fleeing Mosul Assault Find Safety in Iraq, Syria,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, October 25, 2016, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/10/580f5bae4/families-fleeing-mosul-assault-find-safety-iraq-syria.html>.

some ISIS prisoners. One of the prisoners that was taken in Bashiqa was checked for the possession of a suicide vest and then taken directly to the army staff of Peshmerga, which was directly overseeing the operation in the battlefield. The prisoner was terrified. The army staff and the commander of the unit told the prisoner not to worry because unlike ISIS, Peshmerga forces did not kill prisoners but treated prisoners with dignity.³⁵⁰

After the liberation, the president of Kurdistan Region and the commander in chief ordered the Peshmerga forces' commanders to expedite the process of cleaning up the liberated areas from the mines, boobytraps, and unexploded ordnance in order to facilitate the return of the Bashiqa inhabitants to the district.³⁵¹ This directive from higher authority was followed and most of Bashiqa's residents were able to return to the city despite its extensive damage.

Figure 4 shows that the Peshmerga forces encircled Bahsiqa. Because this operation was a preparation for the major Mosul Liberation Operation, the Peshmerga forces decided to eliminate all ISIS militants in this area. The Peshmerga forces wanted to prevent ISIS militants from retreating to Mosul, causing more damage or killing civilians.

³⁵⁰ Kurdistan24, "Qwat al-Peshmerga tujbir ahad musalahi daesh litaslim nafseh baada muhasaratihi fi nahiyat al-Bashiqa" [Peshmerga forces make an ISIS fighter surrender after being encircled by the Peshmerga forces.], 2016, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzOTGb7TQdw&t=13s>.

³⁵¹ Kurdistan24.

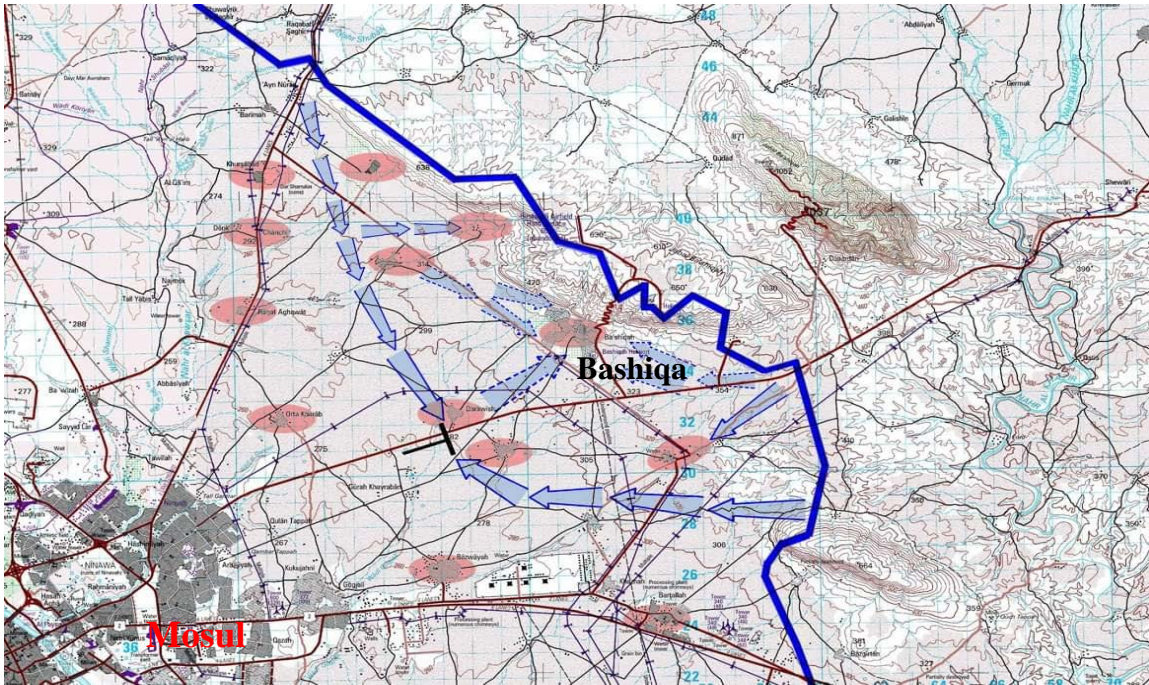


Figure 4. The Plan for Liberating Bashiqa from ISIS, Implemented on October 20, 2016.³⁵²

B. THE PESHMERGA WAS MILITARILY EFFECTIVE WHILE RESPECTING HUMAN RIGHTS

One of the main points that can be highlighted is the adherence of the Kurdish forces to the international human rights resolution and submission to international conventions. Even though the KRG is not a signatory member of the international conventions, the Kurdish political parties voluntarily banned the use of weapons prohibited by the Geneva Convention.³⁵³ The awareness of the Peshmerga made them adhere to norms and avoid extra-judicating ISIS prisoners. According to a survey conducted by Matthew Franklin Cancian and Kristine E. Fabbe, 71% of the surveyed Peshmerga fighters believed that the ISIS fighters should be dealt with according to law and should be sent in

³⁵² Source: Shakhi, *Kurdistan, Heading towards Eternity*, 235–36.

³⁵³ Andrew MacLeod et al., *Humanitarian Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups* (London: Chatham House, 2016), 28, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-04-29-NSAG.pdf>.

front of the court. Furthermore, 31% of the Peshmerga fighters believed that captured ISIS fighters must be rehabilitated and reeducated to be disengaged from radicalism.³⁵⁴

The human rights abuses of the enemy did not impair the Peshmerga's combat effectiveness. In fact, the unit cohesion of the Peshmerga forces was inspired by ISIS's atrocities. Scholar Marco Nilsson, in his article, "Mental Strategies for Fighting the IS: A Field Study of the Peshmerga Soldiers in Northern Iraq," highlights many factors that increased cohesion among Peshmerga units. Standing against the inhumane actions of the enemy, identity and the national cause, religion, and the awareness of the Peshmerga forces about the international treaties were among the reasons the Peshmerga forces avoided human rights abuses.³⁵⁵

According to Nilsson, the inhumane actions of ISIS and their mass killing of civilians and execution of prisoners, made Peshmerga forces believe that fighting them was a duty. ISIS paradoxically increased Peshmerga's cohesion by casting itself as a perpetrator and abuser of human rights, and the Peshmerga became more resilient in facing it. Peshmerga forces, including commanders, believed that whoever committed crimes against civilians did not deserve to be tolerated.³⁵⁶ During Nilsson's empirical visit, a Peshmerga commander stated to Nilsson that, "whoever kills innocent people, women and children, will be punished for their crimes, both here and in the hereafter."³⁵⁷ Thus, the Peshmerga forces gave themselves a positive identity and their enemy a negative one.

The Peshmerga's respect of human rights is noteworthy because other forces fighting ISIS did not respect human rights. These abuses are detailed in a report about human rights abuses by the Department of Defense's Office of Lead Inspector General. The report mentions the atrocities committed by the Iraqi army and the Popular

³⁵⁴ Matthew Franklin Cancian and Kristin E. Fabbe, "What Iraq's Kurdish Peshmerga Believe," *Foreign Affairs*, August 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-08-25/what-iraqs-kurdish-peshmerga-believe>.

³⁵⁵ Marco Nilsson, "Mental Strategies for Fighting the IS: A Field Study of the Peshmerga Soldiers in Northern Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 11 (2016): 1007, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1154750>.

³⁵⁶ Nilsson, 1009–10.

³⁵⁷ Nilsson, 1010.

Mobilization Forces (PMF); but it does not mention any atrocities committed by the Peshmerga.³⁵⁸ The PMF was mainly engaged in human rights abuses such as summary execution, torching the houses of Sunnis, and looting.³⁵⁹

The Peshmerga learned a lot about how to conduct effective and humanitarian military operations during the war against ISIS. The academic literature argues that armies generally learn more from war than from peacetime reorganization.³⁶⁰ In the case of Peshmerga forces, this is true.³⁶¹ The Peshmerga became institutionalized and organizational, which helped it to become more responsive and adaptive against ISIS. The war on ISIS helped the Peshmerga modernize and develop such that it was recognized as a pseudo state force that represented Kurdistan and operated under the umbrella of the Ministry of Peshmerga.³⁶² Furthermore, the Peshmerga forces acted like a state force in protecting the Kurdistan Region and its interests. Since then, these forces have helped the KRG to enforce its position in Iraq and the region.³⁶³

1. Command and Control Helped the Peshmerga Respect Human Rights

According to scholars Max Abrahms and Philip B. K. Potter, the lack of control and a weak structure of leadership allow forces to resort to human rights abuses.³⁶⁴ This is part of the reason for the literature's pessimism about the ability of subnational forces to respect human rights. Because most subnational forces have poor command and control,

³⁵⁸ Department of Defense Inspector General, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2019), 58, https://media.defense.gov/2019/Nov/21/2002214786/-1/-1/1/Q4FY2019_LEADIG_OIR_REPORT_.PDF.

³⁵⁹ Sahr Muhammedally, "Iraq: Learning Civilian Protection the Hard Way," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 4, no. 1 (2015): 4, <https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.ge>.

³⁶⁰ Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

³⁶¹ Matthew F. Cancian, "Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures of the Islamic State: Lessons for U.S. Forces," *Military Review* 97, no. 2 (2017): 53.

³⁶² Charountaki, "From Resistance to Military Institutionalisation," 1585.

³⁶³ András Derzsi-Horváth and Erica Gaston, "Fracturing of the State: Recent Historical Events Contributing to the Proliferation of Local, Hybrid, and Sub-State Forces," Global Public Policy Institute, August 24, 2017, <https://www.gppi.net/2017/08/24/fracturing-of-the-state>.

³⁶⁴ Abrahms and Potter, 612.

abuses of human rights are not punished. By contrast, the Peshmerga are tactically integrated into a centralized ministry (Figure 5).

The Ministry of Peshmerga, as the highest military institution of the Kurdistan Region, has spread awareness among the Peshmerga about international norms and the need to respect civilians during conflicts. Furthermore, the Peshmerga forces have been trained on complying with the rules of engagement and they are trained to know that they are “fighters not killers.”³⁶⁵ The Ministry of Peshmerga has emphasized teaching the Peshmerga forces a set of rules or Code of Conduct to adhere to. Therefore, the Peshmerga were less prone to committing human rights abuses during the war on ISIS. From that one can tell that the institutionalized Ministry of Peshmerga fostered the awareness of the Peshmerga in respecting human rights.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁵ “Code of Conduct for the Peshmerga,” Kurdistan Regional Government Ministry of Peshmerga, December 5, 2018, <http://mope.gov.krd/English/2018/11/13/code-of-conduct-for-the-peshmerga/>.

³⁶⁶ “Code of Conduct for the Peshmerga.”

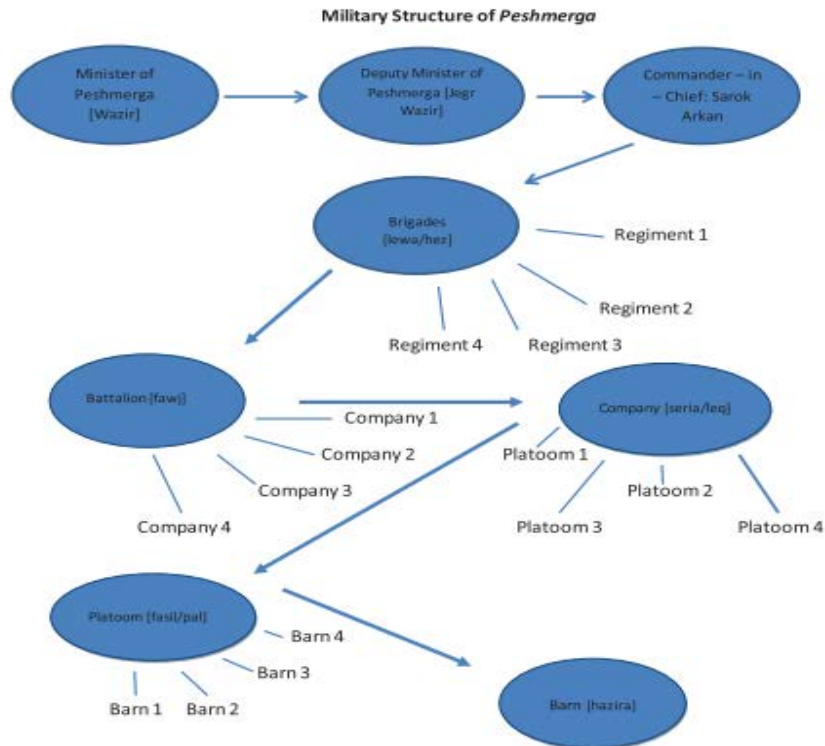


Figure 5. The Structure of the Ministry of Peshmerga³⁶⁷

According to the scholar Marianna Charountaki, since the establishment of the Ministry of Peshmerga, it has an organized structure that enables Peshmerga forces to function as a regular state army.³⁶⁸

Robust command and control enable forces to function based on designated strategies. The fight against ISIS improved the command and control of the Peshmerga forces. According to Charountaki, the decision making and all the military plans of the Kurdish Peshmerga, were centralized in the presidency of the Kurdistan Region.³⁶⁹ The president of the Kurdistan Region was making decisions and overseeing the military planning process of the Peshmerga forces. Charountaki also believes that the Clausewitzian principle of the superiority of politics was thereby applied during the war

³⁶⁷ Source: Charountaki, "From Resistance to Military Institutionalisation," 1584.

³⁶⁸ Charountaki, 1584.

³⁶⁹ Charountaki, 1595.

on ISIS.³⁷⁰ Military plans and strategies came directly from the president down to the troops. Figure 6 illustrates the hierarchy of command and control of the Peshmerga forces during the war on ISIS.

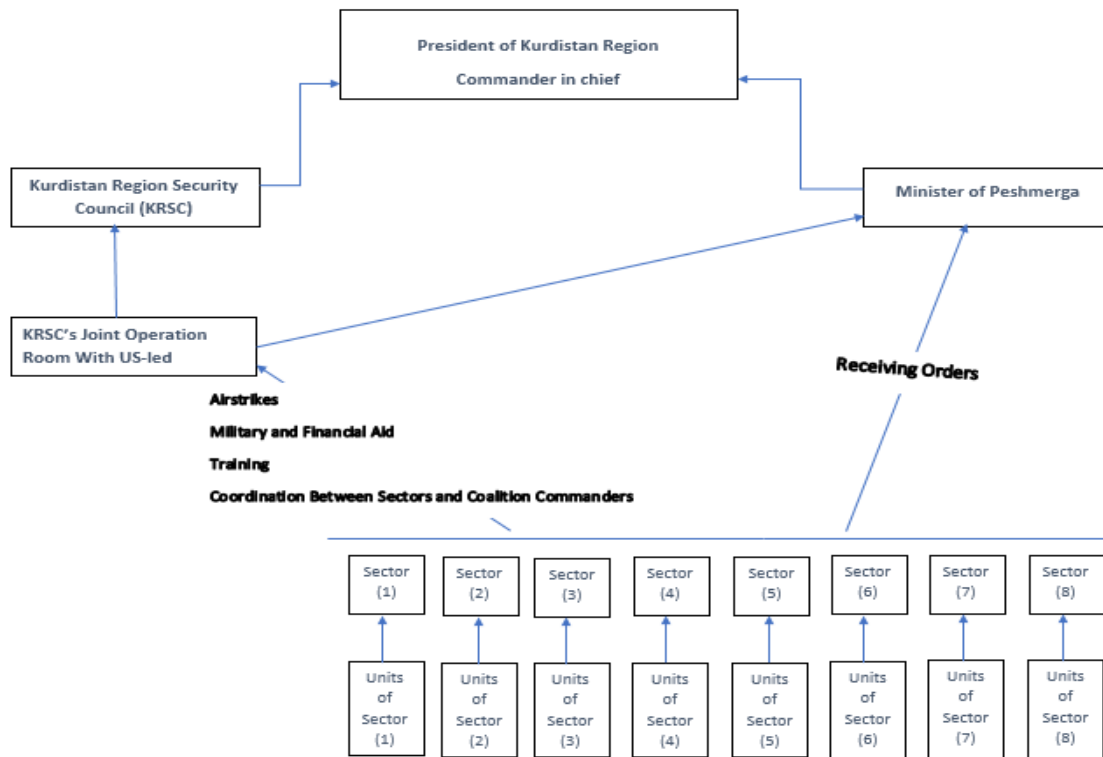


Figure 6. The Structure of Command and Control of the Peshmerga Forces during the War against ISIS.³⁷¹

The structure of the command and control shows a clear chain of command over the long Peshmerga front by dividing it into eight sectors. Thus, a clearer chain of command existed for the subordinate commanders to deal with for reporting, requesting coalition support, and receiving orders from the higher authority. From the hierarchy shown in Figure 6, it can be noticed that the responsibilities of each component are designated in a way that

370 Charountaki, 1595.

³⁷¹ Source: Staff Brigadier General Hazhar Ismael, email message to author, January 10, 2020: The Structure of the Command and Control of the Peshmarga forces during the war against ISIS.

the clear boundaries of each authority is taken into consideration without having authorities overlap and create confusion.

The commander in chief of the Peshmerga made sure to lead the offensive operations against ISIS himself and demonstrated leadership capabilities in commanding his forces.³⁷² As an example of command and control, at the beginning of the operations against ISIS, the president of Kurdistan as the chief of military forces ordered the security forces to respect human rights and avoid human right violations.³⁷³ The key tasks delegated to the sector commanders enhanced the clarity of the orders and fostered the awareness of the Peshmerga forces about the orders. Also, as a safety precaution, the commander in chief issued a resolution preventing the Peshmerga from committing human rights abuses. Furthermore, he ordered the Peshmerga forces to abide by international norms, comply with international agreements and protect all civilians regardless of ethnic background. Before issuing this resolution, at the beginning of the war in 2014, the commander in chief had already ordered the Peshmerga to protect civilians and abide by international norms.³⁷⁴ Figure 7 shows the division of the frontlines of the Peshmerga among eight sectors. This division of sectors enabled a better control and leadership of commanders on their subordinates.

³⁷² Brent Scowcroft Center, "A Conversation with H.E. Masoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," Atlantic Council, May 2015, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/transcript/a-conversation-with-h-e-masoud-barzani-president-of-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq/>.

³⁷³ Sahr Muhammedally, "Peshmerga: 'We Must Uphold Our Values and Protect Civilians in Defeating Daesh,'" *Center for Civilians in Conflict* (blog), August 17, 2016, <https://civiliansinconflict.org/blog/peshmerga-we-must-uphold-our-values-and-protect-civilians-in-defeating-daesh/>.

³⁷⁴ Shwan Barznji, "Barzani Issues a Resolution to Protect Human Rights While Fighting IS," BasNews, April 12, 2016, <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/news/269922>.

Despite the high level of tactical institutionalization and organization, the Peshmerga forces were still politically disunited;³⁷⁶ however, this political separation did not manifest itself in tactical ineffectiveness or human rights abuses. Tactically, the Peshmerga forces operated like a united body that did not look like it had gaps in it, and the Peshmerga forces became a significant force in fighting ISIS.³⁷⁷ Although the Peshmerga forces were not unified and there were units of the Peshmerga forces that were affiliated with political parties, the Peshmerga still actively fought against ISIS. Yet, they demanded to be unified so they could be more active in combating terrorism, and this is what Amelia Hoover Green calls the social institution characteristic of the military institution.³⁷⁸ In a survey by Cancian and Fabbe, 99% of the Peshmerga forces believed that if a Peshmerga fighter from another political party was injured during the fighting, they would give the wounded Peshmerga first aid. Also, 98% of the surveyed Peshmerga fighters supported the political integration of the Peshmerga forces so they could fight more effectively.³⁷⁹ What gaps in the political institutions of the Peshmerga existed were outweighed by their integration in tactical command and control.³⁸⁰

Figure 8 illustrates the Code of Conduct taught in training Peshmerga forces how to respect human rights. It also shows the “Not to do” actions, in order to prevent Peshmerga forces from committing human rights abuses.

³⁷⁶ Samuel Helfont, *Getting Peshmerga Reform Right: Helping the Iraqi Kurds to Help Themselves in Post-ISIS Iraq* (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2017), <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Helfont-Final-Online-Version.pdf>.

³⁷⁷ Charountaki, “From Resistance to Military Institutionalisation,” 1598.

³⁷⁸ Amelia Hoover Green, “The Commander’s Dilemma: Creating and Controlling Armed Group Violence,” *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 5 (2016): 623, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343316653645>.

³⁷⁹ Cancian and Fabbe, “What Iraq’s Kurdish Peshmerga Believe.”

³⁸⁰ Nilsson, “Mental Strategies for Fighting the IS,” 1008.

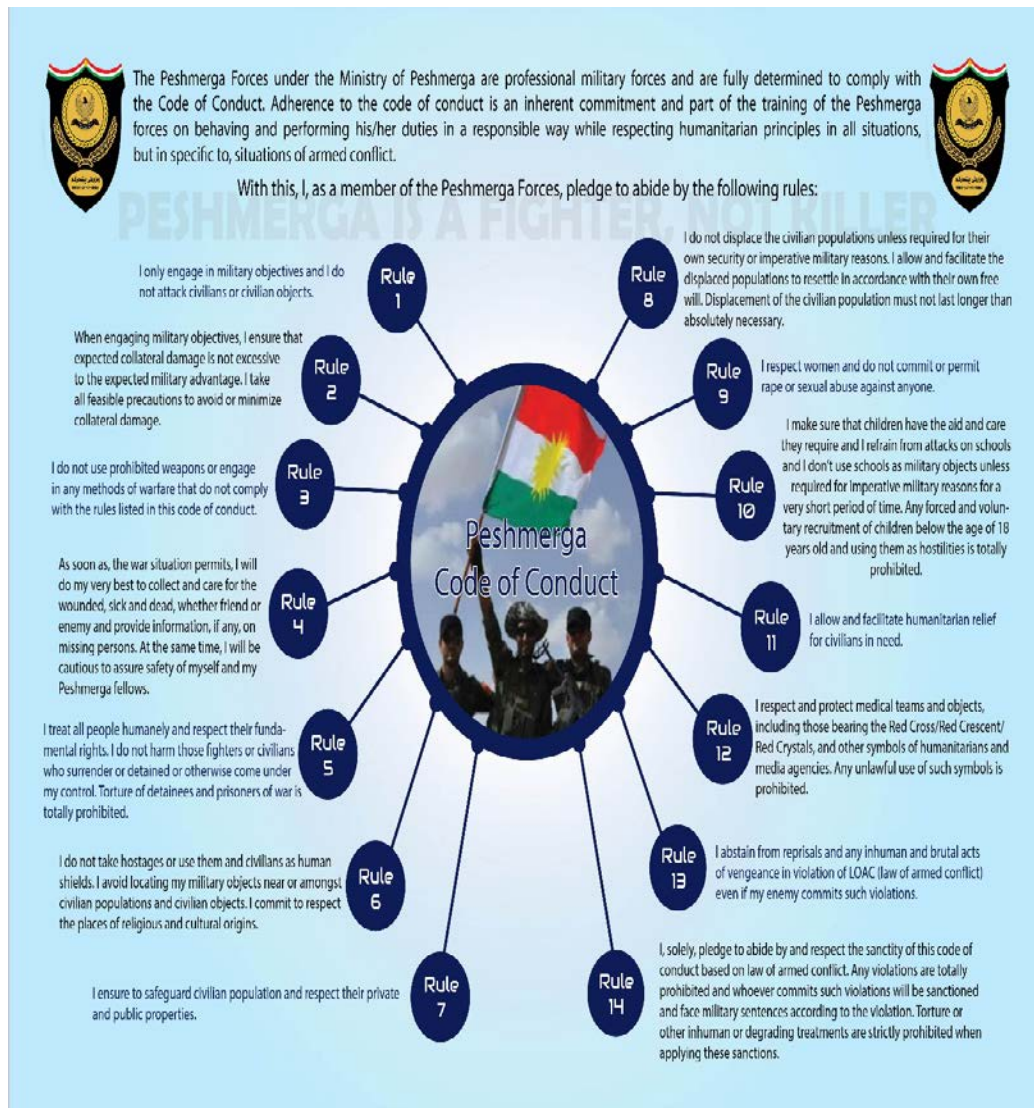


Figure 8. The Official Code of Conduct Guide Used during Training of Peshmerga as a Professional Military Force.³⁸¹

2. Foreign Training Enabled the Peshmerga to Respect Human Rights

The Peshmerga received training from different global organizations that helped increase the Peshmerga forces' awareness about respecting human rights.³⁸² The Peshmerga

³⁸¹ Source: "Code of Conduct for the Peshmerga."

³⁸² "Iraq: Population Racked by Heavy Burden of Decades of Conflict," International Committee of the Red Cross, March 15, 2013, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/update/2013/03-15-iraq-2012.htm>.

forces avoided human rights abuses because of the support they received from the U.S-led coalition of democratic countries. This support enabled the Peshmerga forces to retake control of the swath of areas that the KRG lost during the initial phase of ISIS's attack on the Kurdistan Region. Also, the weapons they received from the coalition forces enabled the Peshmerga forces to sustain fewer casualties. Thus, it is counterintuitive for a force to risk external support of democratic countries by committing human rights abuses.

In addition to providing fire support, coalition training and equipment built the Peshmerga's combat capabilities; these increased capabilities enabled the Peshmerga to be more targeted in their operations and thus reduce collateral damage. According to Cancian, when the war started against ISIS, the Peshmerga forces had almost zero capability and knowledge about defusing and countering IEDs. Thus, Peshmerga forces sustained many casualties, which raised the strategic cost of operations. After the training that the Peshmerga forces received from the coalition forces, however, the Peshmerga forces became more familiar in dealing with IEDs. Special units for countering IEDs were established within the Peshmerga, which helped the Peshmerga to sustain fewer casualties.³⁸³ Cancian also explains that at the beginning of the conflicts, the Peshmerga forces sustained many casualties because of the Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIED). Later, when the Peshmerga forces received anti-tank weapons from France and Germany, the number of Peshmerga casualties decreased. The German Milan anti-tanks were especially praised among Peshmerga forces as they helped the Peshmerga to destroy the VBIEDs easily.³⁸⁴ Brig. Gen. Hazhar Ismail, the director of the Ministry of Peshmerga's coordination and relations directorate, believes that these German anti-tanks helped save the lives of hundreds of Peshmerga fighters.³⁸⁵ He believes that the coalition forces were generous in terms of providing necessities for the Peshmerga forces, and enabled Peshmerga forces to halt the advances of

³⁸³ Cancian, "Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures of the Islamic State," 55.

³⁸⁴ Cancian, 57–58.

³⁸⁵ Hazhar Ismael, "Kurdish Peshmerga Needs More Equipment From the West," *Newsweek*, November 2, 2015, <https://www.newsweek.com/kurdish-peshmerga-needs-more-equipment-west-389360>.

ISIS. Furthermore, this helped in reducing the civilian casualties as it helped in preventing ISIS from committing more genocides in the area.³⁸⁶

The Peshmerga forces became more aware of international norms and civil protection because of exposure to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The ICRC has trained the Peshmerga forces many times. This training course included different level of ranks of the Peshmerga forces.³⁸⁷ This training continued for years, until the emergence of ISIS.³⁸⁸ The ICRC helped the Peshmerga forces to be more familiar with international norms, human rights, and the rules of engagement. The ICRC helped in paving the way for other human rights organizations to open training courses for the Peshmerga forces. These courses emphasized complying with the international norms and protection of the civilians.³⁸⁹ This training influenced peacetime behavior as well. For example, in 2019, after receiving a human rights organization, the minister of Peshmerga reiterated that the doors of the ministry were wide open for the humanitarian organization.³⁹⁰

C. CONCLUSION

The best recognition comes from your enemy: ISIS members consistently recognized the humanitarian nature of the Peshmerga and acted accordingly. Although ISIS attacked the Kurdistan Region and the Peshmerga forces, when they knew that their families were in danger, ISIS fighters transported their families towards the Peshmerga frontline. After their arrival, the Peshmerga forces treated these families with respect, provided them with water and food, and then transported them to refugee camps in the Kurdistan Region. When the ISIS families were asked why they did not go to the Iraqi side, they stated that they knew that

³⁸⁶ Ismael.

³⁸⁷ "Iraq: ICRC Activities in January 2009," International Committee of the Red Cross, March 11, 2009, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/update/iraq-update-110309.htm>.

³⁸⁸ "Iraq: Spreading Knowledge of International Humanitarian Law," International Committee of the Red Cross, August 12, 2013, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/interview/2013/08-12-iraq-ihl.htm>.

³⁸⁹ Muhammedally, "Peshmerga."

³⁹⁰ Media Center, Ministry of Peshmerga, "KRG Minister of Peshmerga: 'Our Door Is Always Open towards International Humanitarian Organizations,'" Peshmerga, November 11, 2019, <https://mope.gov.krd/English/amp/2019/11/11/kg-minister-of-peshmerga-our-door-is-always-open-towards-international-humanitarian-organizations/>.

Peshmerga forces would not extradite them, and they would be safe with them. The Peshmerga were unlike the Iraqi forces and the PMF, who would kill them. These families had witnessed what these forces did to civilians during the previous operations of the Iraqi Army and the PMF. Furthermore, they stated that ISIS fighters told them, “if you want to leave, go to Peshmerga side, there you will be treated with respect.”³⁹¹

The Peshmerga forces also treated ISIS fighters with respect. After arresting ISIS fighters, the Peshmerga forces did not mistreat them. For example, after Peshmerga forces arrested ISIS fighters, and gave them water and treated them with respect, a reporter asked one of the Peshmerga fighters, “why do you treat the prisoners like that?” The Peshmerga officer responded, “they are prisoners, they surrendered themselves and they are human beings. However, I know that we will not receive the same treatment from them if we were their prisoners, but still I need to treat him like a human being.”³⁹²

Coalition support, strong command and control, and local integration enabled the Peshmerga to earn this respect. Coalition support spread human rights awareness while also incentivizing the Peshmerga to use it. The institutional status of Peshmerga that included a robust and clear structure of command and control, a well-organized institution, professional training related to protection of human rights, and the social characteristic of the Peshmerga forces encouraged the Peshmerga fighters to avoid human rights abuses. Finally, the Peshmerga forces tried to avoid the lack of communal solidarity, something that the Peshmerga lacked when the ISIS militants attacked Shingal and the Sunni tribes sided with ISIS. The KRG established a special brigade for the Arab citizens of al-Rabia area in order to create the missing communal support from these citizens, which enhanced their cooperation with the Peshmerga forces.

³⁹¹ “Bizana chakdarani daesh chi ba khalkaka dalet ka halden bo lai Peshmerga” [See what ISIS has told the people who fled towards Peshmerga forces], YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRZPqmOfqn4&feature=share>.

³⁹² “Kati grtni dow dili daesh ba dasti Peshmerga” The moment that the Peshmerga forces arrested two ISIS fighters.([, YouTube,” July 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPsCOyi7m24>.

V. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis explored how the Peshmerga as a subnational force in Iraq contributed to the war against ISIS. In Chapter I, the literature review showed how subnational forces are viewed negatively by scholars, especially in terms of abusing human rights. Chapter II covered the history of the Peshmerga, while Chapter III explored the history of ISIS and the motivation behind the ISIS attack on the Kurdistan Region. In Chapter IV, the hypotheses were tested through three case studies of Peshmerga operations against ISIS at al-Rabia, the siege of Mount Shingal, and at Bashiqa. Specifically, this thesis presented these three case studies to test two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: International support to the Peshmerga forces and training by democratic states that emphasize respect for human rights and civilian immunity resulted in fewer atrocities committed by the Peshmerga in their prosecution of the war against ISIS.

Hypothesis 2: Robust command and control capabilities within the Peshmerga forces helped prevent human rights violations and other forms of militant predation.

A. HYPOTHESIS 1: THE FORM AND INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL SUPPORT

The U.S-led coalition helped the Peshmerga forces in various ways as explained in Chapter IV of this thesis. The support was mainly provided through air support, training, equipping, and funding. This support impacted the success of the Peshmerga in countering ISIS. When ISIS first attacked the Kurdistan Region, the Peshmerga forces did not have the right armament to fight back; therefore, the Peshmerga forces retreated from many areas. After the arrival of the U.S-led coalition forces, the Peshmerga forces were able to retake lost areas. The evidence that suggests this fact is that the commander in chief and other officials of the Kurdistan Region thanked this coalition for providing air support to the Peshmerga during Operation Breaking the Siege of Mount Shingal. Also, during Operation Bashiqa the air strikes enabled the Peshmerga forces to defeat their enemy.

The commanders of the Peshmerga showed their appreciation for the coalition forces for their active role in helping the Peshmerga forces to sustain fewer casualties for

three main reasons. First, at the beginning of the war, because Peshmerga forces did not have the right types of weapons to destroy ISIS VBIEDs, Peshmerga forces sustained a large number of casualties, but after the arrival of anti-tank weapons from the coalition forces, Peshmerga forces were able to destroy ISIS VBIEDs without sustaining casualties. Second, because the Peshmerga forces did not have the right type of training at the beginning of the war, they sustained many casualties because of the ISIS boobytraps and IEDs. After that, the Peshmerga forces were trained by the coalition forces, and sustained fewer casualties and became professional in countering IEDs. Finally, the training that the Peshmerga forces received from the ICRC helped increase the awareness of the Peshmerga forces about human rights. This hypothesis was tested through the qualitative method and information obtained from unclassified sources. The ICRC training as an external source of familiarization with human rights helped the Peshmerga forces to become more familiar with human rights and meet expectations during peace and wartime. This hypothesis proved to be true as the huge impact of external support helped the Peshmerga forces sustain fewer casualties; thus, risking this support would be counterintuitive. Therefore, the hypothesis is proved to be true as explained by the provided evidence.

B. HYPOTHESIS 2: THE FORM AND IMPACT OF MILITARY INSTITUTIONALIZATION

The institutionalization that Peshmerga forces developed incentivized them to refrain from committing human rights abuses. The strong leadership of the commander in chief and his presence during the operations, issuing resolutions for the Peshmerga, made it clear through robust command and control capabilities that human rights violations and other forms of militant predation would not be tolerated.³⁹³ Additionally, the training that Peshmerga received clearly framed what they needed to do and what they needed to avoid, introducing to Peshmerga forces the notion that they were not “Killers but Fighters.” This evidence provided a means for testing this hypothesis through the qualitative method, aided by the official documents of the Ministry of Peshmerga and training documents of the Peshmerga forces. The hypothesis appears correct as the outcome shows that the

³⁹³ Hoover Green, “The Commander’s Dilemma,” 630.

institutionalization of the Peshmerga forces represented by a strong structure of command and control in addition to the proper training enabled the Peshmerga forces to operate within the parameters of human rights.

The response of the Peshmerga defies the expectations of some scholars. In my introduction, I recounted the arguments of scholars such as Jentzsch and Kalyvas, who state that subnational forces prolong civil wars. Zartman believes that subnational forces are “spoilers of peace.” Aliyev believes that subnational forces generally do not allow governments to achieve victory because announcement of victory will endanger the government supplies to them. He also believes that subnational forces increase the lethality of war because they lack proper training and prolong wars, which both result in increasing collateral damage. Carey believes that subnational forces increase violence against civilians and human rights abuse, which is a common theme among all the aforementioned scholars.³⁹⁴ Despite this scholarly consensus, the case of the Peshmerga in Iraq in 2014–2017 illustrates that subnational forces can defy the trend. It is likely that the institutionalization of the Peshmerga forces and their support by democratic nations played a key role in making Peshmerga forces respect human rights.

C. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As the United States is increasingly challenged for global hegemony, it becomes more important to leverage partner forces and allies.³⁹⁵ The United States could commit hundreds of thousands of troops to defeating insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s because it did not face serious competition from rivals. Now, troop commitments of hundreds of thousands would drastically hinder American ability to counter a rising China or an aggressive Russia. The Peshmerga demonstrated during the war against ISIS that partner forces can take the place of American troop commitments. It is therefore important

³⁹⁴ Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, “Milicias in Civil Wars”; Zartman, *Ripe for Resolution*; and Aliyev, “‘No Peace, No War’ Proponents?”; Carey and Mitchell, “Progovernment Militias.”

³⁹⁵ Department of Defense Inspector General, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

for policy makers to understand the conditions that allowed the Peshmerga to be both militarily effective and humanitarian in its conduct.

In the specific case of the Middle East, Kurdish forces like the Peshmerga have shown their value as a force multiplier. The Peshmerga forces began cooperation in 1991 with Operation Providing Comfort, which returned thousands of civilians to their cities and secured the borders from the Iraqi army. This trend of Peshmerga's support carried on during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, as Turkey did not allow the United States to use its soil in attacking Iraq. Thus, the desperate U.S. forces relied on the Peshmerga forces to help them in defeating a whole Iraqi division in the northern sector of Iraq. This victory helped the United States to change its tactics and use the indigenous forces as a force multiplier, rather than sending American soldiers to the overseas battlefields. Additionally, during OIR, the United States decided to support the Peshmerga forces by providing limited air support, which played a major role in marking first victories by the Peshmerga forces against ISIS.³⁹⁶ Finally, because of the role that the Peshmerga forces played in the war against ISIS and their respect for human rights, I recommend direct arming of the Peshmerga forces by coalition partners, having joint coalition-Peshmerga bases in the Kurdistan Region, and promoting the human rights values that the Peshmerga possess so they can be taken as an example for other subnational forces.

1. Direct Arming of the Peshmerga Forces

Due to the level of efficiency of the Kurdish Peshmerga containing, degrading, and defeating ISIS, I recommend the coalition forces arm Peshmerga forces directly as they can be a ready force to engage any emerging threat in the region, especially any threat that may emerge from radical groups like ISIS. Delay in the supplies of coalition forces to the Peshmerga because of the indirect supplies through Baghdad has impacted the efficiency of the Peshmerga forces, and Kurdish officials have highlighted this fact.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁶ Charountaki, "From Resistance to Military Institutionalisation," 1595.

³⁹⁷ Kristina Wong, "Kurdish Official Hits Administration over Delayed Weapons," The Hill, April 6, 2015, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/238001-kurdish-official-hits-obama-administration-over-arms-delay>.

Brendan O’Leary argues that direct arming of the Kurdish Peshmerga is not only moral, but it is also a legal step.³⁹⁸ He argues that Article 141 of the Iraqi constitution shows that the laws passed by Kurdish parliament between 1992 and 2005 cannot be revoked by the Iraqi constitution.³⁹⁹ Law number (5) of Kurdistan’s parliament established that the Peshmerga forces are the security forces and the lawful army of Kurdistan. This also can be supported with article number 121 (5) of the Iraqi constitution as it states that “The regional government shall be responsible for all the administrative requirements of the region, particularly the establishment and organization of the internal security forces for the region such as police, security forces, and guards of the region.”⁴⁰⁰

Despite this, the Peshmerga forces are considered a part of the defense forces of Iraq, particularly as Regional Guards, but since the approval of the constitution, the Peshmerga forces are neither being equipped, trained, armed, or funded by the Iraqi federal government.⁴⁰¹ Therefore, the support of coalition forces can help make the Peshmerga a more reliable force, especially after the war on ISIS. Peshmerga forces proved to be the ally whose help the world sought in defeating terrorism in the Middle East.⁴⁰² This fact is suggested by the number of Peshmerga forces’ sustained casualties. About 1,800 Peshmerga fighters were killed in the war against ISIS and about 10,000 more were wounded; yet they still respected the human rights of civilians and captured ISIS fighters.⁴⁰³

³⁹⁸ Brendan O’Leary, “It Is Politically and Morally Right for European States to Support Kurdish Forces in Iraq,” *British Politics and Policy* (blog), August 19, 2014, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/morally-right-to-support-kurdish-forces-in-iraq/>.

³⁹⁹ Iraqi National Assembly, *Iraqi Constitution* (Baghdad, Iraq: Iraqi National Assembly, 2005), 42, <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/iq/iq004en.pdf>.

⁴⁰⁰ Chapman, “Security Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government,” 143.

⁴⁰¹ Charountaki, “From Resistance to Military Institutionalisation,” 1594.

⁴⁰² Agence France-Presse, “Kurdish Peshmerga Forces Launch Offensive to Retake Isis Held Areas.”

⁴⁰³ “Security,” Kurdistan Regional Government, Representation in the United States, 2018, <https://us.gov.krd/en/issues/security/>.

2. Joint Military Bases

Having a U.S. military presence in the Kurdistan Region can help the United States to better assist its allies to maintain the region's security. The Peshmerga can help the United States in human resources and knowing the nature and the culture of the surrounding nations. Thus, the need for deploying American soldiers will decrease. That agrees with the views of Barry R. Posen, who in his article "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," argues that the United States should rely on allied forces instead of sending troops to solve issues like counterinsurgency.⁴⁰⁴

3. Promoting Human Rights Values Using the Peshmerga Example

The values and the norms that the Kurdish people and the Peshmerga forces hold make them reliable long-term allies to U.S. soldiers. The compatibility of norms and values has not been a problem between the U.S. soldiers and Peshmerga forces in the Kurdistan Region. Unlike the rest of Iraq, the Kurdish people have welcomed the U.S. forces, and coalition forces have not been harmed within the boundaries of Kurdistan from hostile action.⁴⁰⁵

The United States and its allied partners can help promote subnational forces like the Peshmerga that respect international norms to set an example, hence motivating them to be an example for other forces that are not abiding by international agreements and conventions. Other subnational forces that observe the flow of support for the Peshmerga as a result of their respect for human rights will try to be like the Peshmerga in order to get the same advantages. Thus, the number of allied forces to the United States will increase and the need for deployment of U.S. forces to other countries with allied subnational forces will decrease. Forces like the Peshmerga that respect human rights can be further enhanced in providing more protection for civilians while engaging with enemy forces. This can be done through coalition forces, as coalition forces have learned effective TTP; the coalition

⁴⁰⁴ Barry R. Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2013): 123–24.

⁴⁰⁵ Nicholas A. Heras, "No Better Friends: The US-Kurdistan Region Security Partnership," *Kurdistan24*, December 22, 2019, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/opinion/d1a8249a-39e2-42f0-a6db-9e687bf8abc8>.

forces like the United States have a longer experience and have learned these lessons the hard way.⁴⁰⁶ Passing this information to the active allied forces will mitigate civilian casualties and at the same time the forces will still be able to protect themselves in combat zones. Therefore, it would be to the benefit of the United States, and would help advance both its security and strategic interests, to aid and train effective and humanitarian-minded partners.

⁴⁰⁶ Muhammedally, "Iraq," 2.

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